原作
アニメ『BNA ビー・エヌ・エー』

デザイン監修・イラスト
TRIGGER

監修
中島かずき

小説
伊瀬ネキセ

BRAND NEW ANIMAL

BNA ZERO

ゼロ

まっさらになれない男たち

アニメ『BNA ビー・エヌ・エー』スピンオフノベライズ

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BNA
ZERO
ビー・エヌ・エー・ゼロ
まっさらになれない獣たち

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BNA ZERO
PROLOGUE

プロローグ

Prologue

It was the second time she had seen the world burn down. The first time was in her home village, where she thought she had lost everything. Now, for the second time, she was in a concentration camp for "beastmen," a place she had resigned herself to thinking of as being the place where she would die.

Angry shouts and screams echoed in the distance. Black smoke and the smell of something burning relentlessly surrounded her, blocking her vision and dulling her sense of smell. Before she knew it, Natalia had fallen to her knees. She looked around.

What had happened?

Even the events of just a few minutes ago were difficult to remember from her numb mind, but she managed to dig the memories out...

Yes. The legend had arrived, she thought.

In the beginning, it was just another day as usual. She was trapped in an iron cage, listening to the screams of the beastmen being dragged out by the guards, hugging her shoulders and shaking, thinking that she would be next.

Every day she lived paralyzed in fear.

She was curled up on the hard bed with her back arched under the weight of the inevitable despair that this would be the day she would die when he came.

He was the silver wolf of legend, a legend that had been handed down from generation to generation among the beastmen. He has lived for a thousand years, and is the savior of the beastmen. He is said to help those who are suffering and lead them to places of peace.

But.

She thinks, *What happened to .....?*

She can remember escaping from the dungeon with him and the other beastmen, but from there on, it's hard to remember what happened after.

She looks around again.

From the familiar look of the floor beneath her feet, there was no doubt that she was in a human laboratory in the prison camp. However, the room, which had been so neat and tidy, had now been thoroughly destroyed and turned into an airy pile of rubble.

It was as if there had been a ..... war.

Was ..... the silver wolf a dream .....? She thought.

That's when she heard something. At first, to her muffled hearing, it sounded like a siren. The siren made a chilling sound that she had heard many times since she was brought to the

human camp. However, this was different from the sound of the siren. It was nostalgic, yes. This was the distant howl of a beast.

Maybe someone was calling her. Natalia hid her small body in the gap between the rubble so that the humans would not see her, and then followed the sound of the howl. Fire and smoke clouded her way, making her eyes and throat hurt. Still, she managed to keep going.

I'm almost there. There's no doubt about it. This is the voice of the wolf....! She thought.

Natalia's eyes widened.

Before her stood a god. A wolf, clad in a silvery light that seemed to have fallen from the stars. He was standing on the protruding rubble, showering the world with a noble roar.

Her own thoughts raced, *It wasn't a dream....., it was .....! He's here to help. I'm saved now. No more mutilations, no more weird injections, no more fire, no more electric shocks...*

Words of joy leaked out of her mouth.

"Master Silver Wolf, ...!"

The silver wolf turned to look at her as if he had been startled, its long tail shimmering with stardust-like light.

Natalia was at a loss for words in relief.

The silver god was crying.

第一話 スケープゴート

BNA ZERO
CHAPTER1

Chapter 1 - Scapegoat

“World War II” seemed to be the name of this war.

She didn't think that was the official name. It was just called that because of the connection between the various battles that took place in different locations, with each battle having a different name: some kind of war, some kind of invasion, some kind of naval battle, and so on.

She was not interested in the names of the battles, but the irony was that it was thanks to the demonic scientists in the beastman camp that Natalia, who lived in a small hidden village deep in the forest, became aware of the situation in the supposedly distant human world.

As she laid on the lab table, breathless and her body tortured, she naturally overheard the words of the dull, white-coated, scientists around her.

The countries of humans had begun to fight all over the world. The scientists' country was outnumbered, and in order to turn the tide, they had turned to the power of the beastmen and were trying to acquire it.

The stories she remembered from them were enough to make her realize how prosperous the human race was.

However, they perished.

At the least the people who had captured them were defeated in another battle. It was soon after the Silver God had rescued the beastmen from the camps. However, this did not mean that the world was completely restored to normal. The dead do not come back to life, and the beastmen who were caught up in the disaster were now homeless.

The sky was light grayish in color, and the smell of gunpowder and the black smoke of battle still lingered in the air. From what she heard; some countries are still at war. She wondered if this burning wind had come from such a distant place, but couldn’t help but think about the problem at hand.

“I'm hungry.....” she said to the sky as if she were talking to it.

Natalia walked down a long, long country road in some region of Europe. She didn't know what the humans called it. She was a young girl in her early teens, her face buried in the collar of a cape she had picked up along the way. She was short, and the hem of her adult cape reached just below her knees, making it look like a raincoat.

“You said the same thing about thirty minutes ago. If you have the pride of a beastman, you should be able to stomach a little hunger.”

The fellow walking next to her naturally recognized that she was speaking to him and replied calmly.

“There’s a town coming up. I’m sure they’ll be cooking up some soup there.”

"You said the same thing an hour ago.....” she said, her lips pursed in frustration as he refused to give her even a shred of sympathy.

Natalia looked down the road as it disappeared over the rise of the hill. If there was more wilderness beyond the hill, she decided, she would pass out right there without thinking. She had survived the hellish beastman camp, but death lay everywhere. Rather than thinking of it as unreasonable or cruel, she felt a little bitter about the fact that, as a beast, she was so quick to take it for granted. Death is a very familiar thing. Even though the war is over, the battle continues. The battle to survive after the war.

Natalia, who was separated from her family and her people back in the camps, was a typical example of this. She didn't know how to get back to her hometown - she knows it burned down without a trace - but she also didn't have the means to survive in a human land. She was almost doomed to die in a corner of some strange city, but the man walking next to her saved her, just like he did in the prison camp. The legendary savior, the Silver Wolf. The hero of fairy tales that lived for a thousand years, was right next to her.

Natalia gently looked up at his face. The adoration and longing that had flooded her heart when she first met him shriveled up as soon as she saw the dewy face of a man with the grimace of a starving beast.

Natalia asks, “You don’t have much patience, do you, Mr. Ogami?”

“I have plenty, there is a huge difference when I’ve lost patience,” he responded flatly.

“I'm not sure if you are being serious or joking," Natalia said, sighing at the image of “God” growing more tattered and ragged in her mind.

Shirou Ogami, that was the name of the legendary savior. Slender and tall. Dull gray hair. He had a quiet look in his eyes, which sounds good, but in reality, the word "dull" would be more appropriate. It was hard to believe that these were the eyes of a god who could see everything with acute clarity, and combined with the deep, hard wrinkles between his eyebrows that looked as if they had been carved into rock, they gave a coldhearted impression and power.

“I really hope there is a town,..... I'm sure there is.....There must be,” Shirou said.

Natalia, who had been moving her feet mindlessly, overheard the slightest hint of weakness in his voice, and looked up at the sky when she heard a shadow overhead cawing.

“Kuro!”

A single crow circled around them in search of a place to land. It was a fellow survivor who had been captured in the beastman camp and had stuck with them after they escaped together. They've been friends ever since.

Kuro aimed for Shirou's shoulder, but one look from him made him feel unapproachable, and he rushed back and landed on Natalia's head.

"Come on, Kuro. If you're going to perch, perch on my shoulder. You'll get mud in my hair," complained Natalia.

"Kaa!" Kuro squealed apologetically and jumped down to her shoulder, handing Natalia the object in his beak. Then, disliking the too-narrow shoulders, he went back to her head.

"Is this ..... money?" Natalia asked.

It was an unfamiliar coin, but it looked like it was definitely human-made. Kuro had flown over the hill. If that's the case, there's a good chance there's a human town ahead.

"Mr. Ogami...?" Natalia started.

"What are you doing? Let's get a move on." The savior had already started walking at an increased speed, leaving Kuro and Natalia to their own devices.

"Wait, wait, wait, already!" exclaimed Natalia.

The world outside her hometown was much bigger than Natalia had imagined, and the legend of the silver wolf was at the highest point, yet he was right next to her, which felt unfortunately familiar.

As it turned out, the town was there. Not a big city like the one where Natalia had been held captive, but a much smaller town. Even from a distance, they could see crumbling houses and cracked roads, and half-wild livestock grazing in the vicinity, as if they had been run out or escaped. Once inside the town, however, the expressions on the faces of the people on the street were not gloomy. Natalia had no idea where the borders of the human country were, but it seemed that this town was on the side of the victors in the war.

The town looked much more developed and beautiful than her hometown, with its rows of houses with bright red roofs on top of elaborate white brick walls.

"Beautiful ....," she murmured, taking in the scene for a moment.

Natalia had a great respect for humans. She admired human beings and the culture they had created. This was extremely unusual for beastmen who tended to avoid getting involved with humans and human society. Not only that, but she was also different from others in that she was sensitive and thoughtful, whereas most beastmen are insensitive and crass. She was

always looking at the few human books in the village chief's house, which made the other beastmen - even her own family - look at her like she was an oddity.

“She's reading a book about humans again.”

“I wonder why she's so interested in those things. I've taught her it's best to stay away from humans.”

“The village chief is a village chief, but they read books together.....”

Natalia hated them for talking like that. She hated the beastmen. The only person who was on her side was the village chief, who said that he used to live in human lands. He said, "Natalia, you are a wise woman with a keen eye for detail. It is never safe to approach humans, but one day you will experience their culture for real, and feel it with an honest heart.”

Thinking back, she wondered if he had ever spoken ill of humans in one way or another. That day when her hometown burned down. While the inhabitants of the village she had hated were grieving, Natalia was glad, if only a little, that their closed world was coming to an end. She hoped to be able to approach the human world. Now that she knows the harsh fate that awaited her, she can't help but think that it was a shallow hope. .....

Her thoughts begin to drift, *Beautiful? That's what you're saying again. It's a human town, this is .....this is the first time you’ve ever seen such a thing. Have you forgotten what humans have done to you? This is the place they created*.

Just as her anger was rising from the pit of her stomach, a metallic clang ..... pulled Natalia's consciousness out of her head and into the real world.

At the same time with the sound came an unmistakable smell. As if caught by the sound, she naturally tilted her body and heard a happy voice passing by.

"Hey. It's a soup kitchen. Let's go,” said Shirou as he passed.

“Thank God. I'm starving,” followed Natalia.

The residents of the town looked somewhat gray. All kinds of people, young and old, men and women, were making their way to the square. Before Natalia knew it, she was running after them. A crowd of people had gathered in front of the stores facing the square. They seemed to be handing out stew, as she looked from side to side at the satisfied faces dispersing from the front of the store. Natalia waited in line, and soon it was her turn.

"Um, is this enough?” she asked nervously, as she held out the coin that Kuro had picked up. She knew a little bit about human society, but she didn't have a clue about the market. The older woman with the cauldron behind her smiled and handed her a plate of stew, saying, "You're a well-behaved young lady with a crow on your head, you don't have to pay for it. Eat plenty of food and get on with your day.”

Natalia returned to Shirou as she ate from the stew on her plate. It was warm, spicy, and cheesy. As a reward, she shared a large potato with Kuro, who had led them to the town.

"Aren't you going to go get in line?" Natalia, who had eaten about half of the potatoes and was coming to her senses, asked when she noticed that Shirou was standing against the wall of the square, with his arms crossed tightly and not moving.

"I will not accept any treatment from humans," Shirou said curtly.

This stubbornness brought a chill to the inside of Natalia's thin chest. It was more than just a feeling of dismay that she had been so hungry causing her to frown now.

"He is the same," she thought.

He's a god. He's a great savior who has been saving beastmen for a thousand years, but he's no different from the stubborn, narrow-minded, unbalanced beastmen back home. They mock human beings and human things, refusing to acknowledge their existence or their value. She had believed that God was more intelligent and generous like the sea.

"Well, eat this, please."

Natalia thrust the plate of stew at Shirou, who was unsure of what she was so angry about.

"You can take charity from a beastman, can't you?" She stated bluntly.

Shirou looked a little taken aback.

"What's this? That stew is for you. You must still be hungry. Eat more."

Natalia retorts, "I've always been a small eater, so I've had enough. Please eat. If you collapse, I won't be able to carry you by myself. If that happens, I'll have a human help me, is that okay?"

"....."

Shirou frowned extremely intensely as he imagined this scene, and finally accepted the stew plate. He was trying to keep a dour look on his face, but as soon as he put the spoon in his mouth, it loosened slightly, and Natalia, who was staring at him, couldn't miss it.

"....."

She was not sure if he realized he was being watched or not, but he hurriedly turned his head in the direction of the sun and began to eat the stew, but it was too late. It would have been a sight to behold if he had grown a tail, Natalia thought with a wry smile. Kuro squealed and laughed along with her. Even a silver wolf can't fight hunger. That's why she wanted to feed him even if she had to.

Suddenly, a clear sound and color spread across the square. The people who had been holding their empty stew plates and looking up at the grayish sky shifted their gazes in one direction. Natalia followed suit, and saw a man plucking a musical instrument with countless strings. The sounds, which had started out as one, soon came together like the folds of a curtain swaying in the wind, bringing a sense of peace and tranquility to the desolate site of the soup kitchen, where signs of war still lingered.

“What the hell is that?” Asked Shirou.

Natalia responded, “It's a zither. It's a zither, Mr. Ogami.”

Natalia, who had only seen the instrument in books, raised her voice at the sight and sound of it.

"A zither? Isn't that just a guitar?”

“It's a more difficult instrument. It's a beautiful sound.....”

She closed her eyes and listened. Beastmen also have songs and music, but they are simple at best, primitive at worst, and not as complex, delicate, and free as this.

Human beings are amazing, after all.... This feeling of admiration began to swell in her heart, but it was suddenly crushed by something.

Why?

She couldn't help but look at Shirou's face, but although he looked unhappy, he kept his mouth tightly shut and didn't say anything. It wasn't his voice that had just put a damper on the excitement. It was something inside of her.

Anger. Sadness. Pain.

Natalia, realizing that she could no longer find the honest feelings she had earlier, cast a resentful glance around the square, as if taking it out on herself. Suddenly, she saw a group of men wearing the same clothes. Men in military uniforms, which she had seen many times before coming here. They looked like they had just returned to the town after a battle, and they were saying something to the people who were there.

“My friend in the war saw a U-boat take a breath,” said one man.

“What the hell? My war buddy's war buddy saw the British blow up a tank by rolling a bomb that looked like a tire,” said another.

No one was seriously listening to the upbeat faces and voices of the four sides of the war. All the people around them smiled and listened to their stories as if they were the ramblings of drunks mixed in with the sound of the zither.

But, then.

"By the way, the beastman unit was terrifying."

“Yeah. Yeah, they were extraordinary.”

As soon as the words were mentioned, the calm atmosphere that had been flowing until then stagnated.

“Are beastmen, you know, still bad?” One of the audience members asked fearfully, and the returning soldier, perhaps pleased by the interest shown in him, answered in a higher tone of voice.

“Oh, my God, that was nothing short of insane. They suddenly turned into beasts, guns didn't work, they threw tanks with their bare hands, and they did whatever they wanted. Our troops were no match for them, but they were not to be outdone. We lured them into a trap, and we all attacked at once.....”

There was more to the story that would have made a beastman furious, but the townspeople hardly seemed to be listening anymore. They all exchanged glances with a hint of anger, and then looked down at their toes.

“There are beastmen in this town, it seems,” Shirou's quiet words shook Natalia's shoulders.

“The people here are thinking about it right now.”

As Shirou calmly analyzed the situation with his eyes, Natalia remembered why he, and she, were wandering around like this. To save beastmen who were being tormented by humans, that was the purpose of the Silver Wolf's long, long journey. Natalia, who had been picked up by him along the way, was also helping him.

“Let's go see.”

He put the plate down and walked away, and Natalia hurriedly followed him, but made sure to return the plate to the woman who gave it to her, and thanked her for it.

It wasn't long before they found where the beastmen lived. Shirou, who was accustomed to finding beastmen, was able to determine their general location just from the attitudes and signs of people on the street, without having to "beastify" himself into a wolf beastman. The house was an ordinary red-roofed house with no particular difference from the others.

“I'm sorry,” said Natalia as she knocked on the door and a friendly old man peeked out from inside. He looked at her, his eyes slightly widened through his reading glasses.

"Oh, ... Are you beastmen?”

"Yes, I'm Natalia and this is Mr. Ogami.”

When Natalia introduced the unfriendly Shirou with one hand, the old man smiled softly and opened the door wide.

“It's been a long time since I've seen a beast outside of my family. Please, come on in.”

The living room was neat and clean, which was probably a normal sight in this town, but to Natalia, who until recently had lived in a crass beastman village, it looked very elegant and clean.

"Who's that, father? Oh, we have visitors.”

The family was gathered in the living room, the cups on the table smelling of something Natalia had never smelled before. It seemed that it was time for a family introduction. Natalia introduced herself again, and they welcomed her. There were five of them: the old Merry couple, their son and his wife, and a small baby. Other than this family, there seemed to be no other beastmen living in this town.

“You seem to be traveling a long way, where are you from?” Old Robert Merry, the head of the family, spoke softly to Natalia. His mannerisms reminded Natalia of the village chief back home.

“I'm from the north. I don't know the name of the city,” she responded.

Robert nodded several times as he responded in a straightforward manner, "That is the area where the urban warfare was fiercest. It must have been very difficult for you. This area was once occupied by enemy forces, but the Allies took it back soon after, so we didn't suffer much damage. Fortunately, my family is all safe. Still... I'm sorry for those who lost their homes and are struggling.....”

“I'm sorry for those who lost their homes and are struggling,” Natalia thought, “It's more like.....”

“Can you live in a human town?” Natalia asked frankly and suddenly.

The old couple looked at each other, smiled, and nodded, "Of course.”

“The people in the town seem to know that you are beastmen, is this correct?” Their smiles did not change when Shirou, who was drinking his tea in a surprisingly elegant manner, asked.

“Yes," answered Robert. “They are aware of this and have accepted it. We are grateful for that.”

Natalia knew of cases where people hide their true nature and settled in human towns, but this was the first time she had ever heard of a case like the Merry family. She glanced over at Shiro, but he didn't seem surprised. From his point of view, this was nothing unusual.

"Excuse me, but are you two siblings?” Robert asked.

Natalia shook her head hurriedly, “No, we’re not. I was taken prisoner from my village by the humans. This man saved me.”

“Oh, my God, I didn't know that. That must have been hard for you. I'm glad you survived.”

Robert lowered his eyebrows in deep sympathy, but did not ask any more questions. He wondered what had happened to the village after that, and why Natalia was with Shirou instead of with the villagers. He probably didn't say anything about the situation because he assumed the worst, in order not to hurt her.

The excessive consideration made Natalia a bit uncomfortable.

In her mind she missed her hometown and its people very little. Even if everyone was safe and the village was rebuilt, she would still be ridiculed and have to live a stifling life back there. It's not a lie that she wouldn't have survived if Shirou hadn't saved her, but the reason she is still attached to the Silver Wolf is not because she has a strong sense of purpose. She was looking for something, something that she needed to find. Natalia kept making excuses to herself in her mind, but Shiro didn't say anything and just allowed her to stay quietly next to him. To him, if you want to find something, you have to ask.

Believing in what the village chief had once told her, Natalia asked the next question to continue the conversation, “Do you and your family all share the same animal nature?”

“Yes, we are goat-beasts,” responded Robert.

Beasthood - that is the kind of animal one has the power to change into. For beastmen, this is just a topic of conversation as a form of greeting and is shared without prejudice or discrimination. The first thing that surprised Natalia when she was captured by the humans was how ignorant they were about beasts and beastmen. She knew that the beastmen are more ignorant. They have been avoiding human contact for a long time, so it is natural for them to be ignorant of the world. However, Natalia found it inexplicable that humanity, with its vast knowledge and wisdom, did not know even the most rudimentary things about beastmen.

First of all, their biggest misconception was that beastmen were "not human.” They were surprised to find that they did not have multiple stomachs or extremely long intestines. This was ridiculous, she thought. All beastmen have been told from a young age that beastmen

are human beings. They are another human race with origins in a different human genus than other humans, and have developed a different culture. That is what the beastmen are. During the course of their evolution, they acquired the power to change their bodies in order to get closer to the animal species that they worshipped as gods. This beastification is the reason why beastmen are called beastmen, but they are based on humans.

“Goats are relatively mild-mannered, so I think they would get along well with humans.”

Robert responds, “That's true, of course. Of course, we take care not to bother people, but that's what everyone in the town does. By the way, what about you?”

"I'm a naked mole rat. Mr. Ogami is a wolf. And this is a crow.”

"Kaa," Kuro greeted, spreading his wings to the delight of the baby who saw him.

There was one more thing that the human scientists had got fundamentally wrong. That is, even if they have different animal characteristics - for example, a lion beastman and a gorilla beastman - they are still the same species. The main component of beastmen is the human component. No matter how diverse their beastly forms may be, beastmen are still a single species: beastmen.

However, their personalities and temperaments often resemble those of the animals, whose form they take. This is because, in the beginning, beastmen wanted to look like the beasts they revered so much that they actually became them, so imitating their nature is already an instinct. This may have confused humanity even more.

“With regards to what was said at the soup kitchen in the town square, are you all still okay?” Natalia posed the question again. The reason why Shirou didn't interrupt this chatty conversation was because this was a part of the investigation. He would rescue them if he found out that they were in danger. That was the role of the Silver Wolf.

“We're still okay," Robert said with a hint of weakness in his face, his gaze shifting, perhaps unconsciously, to his son and daughter-in-law and their baby.

“We don't have much, but I can pick wild vegetables in the mountains. Free food rations should be given to those who are really struggling.”

“I think that's a very noble idea,” responded Natalia.

Just because they are goat beasts does not mean that they have the same diet as goats. There is no way that wild vegetables alone can provide all of their nourishment, and when she looks carefully, she can see that the faces of the Merry family are slightly gaunt. This kind of patience is probably necessary to live with humans, and yet there is a savior by their side who doesn't even care about their sacrifice.

“There is no need to care about humans. Put your own lives first.” Shirou spoke bluntly

"Mr. Ogami……" Natalia said as she hurriedly thrust her elbow into his side, but it was too late. He was resentful and did not move an eyebrow. She wondered what he was thinking about.

“That's not very nice…….”

The Merry family also had a slightly troubled expression on their faces. What would they look like if she told them that this man was the Messiah? The end of the legend would begin today.

“At any rate, I'm sure you're both tired from your long journey,” Robert spoke, ”I can't offer much, but at least you can stay here. There are not many places where a traveling beastman can rest in peace…….”

“Oh, n-no……” Natalia stumbles.

“No food, thank you, but water and a place to sleep would be much appreciated.” As Natalia hesitated, Shirou's clear voice interrupted her. He did not burden the kind people with his words, but he was also very bold in his manner of speaking. His tone of voice and the exquisite balance of his request may indeed be the result of a thousand years of experience, she thought.

Natalia, who hadn't been able to sleep well in bed for a long time, listened to Robert talk about life in the town until noon the next day. She waited for the bell to ring for the soup kitchen, and then went out to the square. All of Robert's stories were interesting: the history of the square, the harvest festival at a nearby farm, the music of the zither, and the story of how his grandfather came to be in the town. All of this resonated in Natalia's mind more clearly than the words in the books she had read.

In the square, a line formed in front of the store, just as it had done yesterday. She ate some of the stew she had received and then immediately handed the rest to Shirou.

“You've barely eaten anything.”

He may have thought she was concerned about him, but he seemed slightly unhappy to her. Her body does not regulate its temperature very well due to her animal nature. As a result, she uses less energy and therefore consumes fewer calories. Picking up her warm, fur-lined cape, Natalia said, "I'll leave it to you to keep me warm," and looked around the square. The pair of ex-military men from yesterday had not arrived.

She overheard the word "beastman" coming out of the conversation of the men sitting on the stairs nearby.

"Yeah. Yes, I know. That's Merry's place, the chimney sweep. You know, the chimney sweeps, the ones who work for low wages without complaining?”

Apparently, they were acquainted with Robert's son.

"That house just had a baby, so life must be hard for them, right? Why don't they come to the square for food?”

"Well? I wonder why?

The tone of the conversation dropped.

"Maybe he's been storing food in his house without telling us? See, he's a beast, right? Maybe he's transforming into an animal and is stealing from the fields to avoid detection.....”

“No way. He's a good guy.”

“I don't know, man. I don't know," he said. "Right now, there's a lot of livestock outside of town that escaped from the farmers. If there's a little damage, they'll think it's their fault. I’ll think it's their fault.....”

Natalia lost her temper and tried to talk back to the men. The Merry family is suffering, but they have endured not coming to the soup kitchen for the sake of the people of the town. It was a one-sided conversation made behind their backs. However, a large hand clamped down on her shoulder as she tried to lean forward.

“Mr. Ogami...”

The words she had almost spat out were left behind in the void, and Natalia gulped as she was pulled into Shirou's shadow. He was looking cautiously towards the entrance of the square. The men who had just walked in were different from the townspeople.

".....!”

Natalia became aware of the change in the air. A swarthy atmosphere had surrounded them.

A man yelled to the townspeople, “Is there anyone in this town who has been involved with the enemy? If you know of anyone who has made a fortune trading with the enemy, women who have slept with enemy men, or any other shameless person who has tried to survive by flattering the enemy, please let us know!”

It’s “The Banishment Movement” Natalia gulped again as she remembered who they were, from a city they had passed through earlier. She felt her low body temperature drop even further. To put it simply, what they were doing was revenge against those who had been involved with the enemy. As if to make an example of them, they ripped off their clothes in public, shouted abuse at them, and then beat and kicked them. What was frightening was that the people who had lived with the beaten only a few days prior, joined in with their horrible looks. Those who tried to stop them were beaten mercilessly. It was as if the madness of the war, which had been barely contained until then, had burst forth all at once.

It may have been a punishment that should have been carried out based on proper rules. However, in the small towns and villages where it was difficult to enforce these rules, the activities became more and more extreme and gruesome, and the meaning of revenge became stronger.

“It's better not to be seen. Keep quiet,” ordered Shirou.

Even as he removed his hand from her shoulder, Natalia's body could not move from Shirou's shadow. She was afraid of the people who were changing.

“This place was only occupied for a short time, and the enemy went away while we stayed indoors.” A jovial man shouted to dispel the tense atmosphere. The other residents looked at each other for a moment, then nodded in agreement. The air was slightly relaxed, but the men of the "Banishment Movement" seemed unhappy.

The man from the town who spoke up first said, "you can’t tell me it's all the people living here?”

"Then what about the strangers? In this day and age, you wouldn't know if some criminal had infiltrated your town. In other towns, there have been thugs hiding in the streets pretending to be veterans!”

“They've changed their target,” Shirou murmurs in annoyance.

This is always the case. Their bloodshot eyes were filled with the will to attack and eliminate anyone they could. From her point of view, this is the main reason why the "Banishment Movement" looked so creepy and vile to Natalia. Natalia could feel the air in the square changing slightly. The skin of the naked mole rat was sensitive. Although she could not display this sensitivity in her human form, she could sense the similarities.

“Strangers……”

“A dangerous man: ……”

Slowly but surely, the air in the square began to drift towards hysteria. The discourse of the men of the "Banishment Movement" was shifting from "get rid of the traitors" to "get rid of the untrustworthy strangers". And yet, no one is arguing with them anymore. They want a sacrifice, a sacrifice that will make them feel a little safer…….

The eyes of the people gathered in the square began to search each other as if thinking,
“I'm not sure if there's anyone I don't know. Is there anyone you don't know or trust?”

“If I can't trust them, even a little bit, I want to get rid of them while I can.”

Without even looking at her, Shirou took Natalia's arm and left the square without a sound, quite naturally. He moved like a panther leaping from darkness to darkness, rather than the paw of a wolf in pursuit of its prey.

“The beastmen will be targeted,” Shirou told her plainly as he moved toward the Merry family's place of residence. Natalia had a hunch, too.

Natalia protested, “I'll try to persuade them somehow ..... There is nothing wrong with Robert and his family. If we talk to them, they will .....”

“Do they look like they’ll understand you? The Merry’s will be mobbed soon. We have to get the family to safety,” snapped Shirou.

It was unreasonable. Why should the beastmen be attacked when it was the humans who started the war and invaded this town? Natalia heard the sound of a zither coming from somewhere. It was not the gentle melody of yesterday, but a sound that stirred up anxiety and commotion. She didn't want to hear such a sound. They arrived at the house of the Merry family. They had no idea what was going on and were having a peaceful time. It was true, they could not be blamed for anything.

"Hello, Natalia. Welcome back, Mr. Ogami. What's up with .....?” Robert sensed that something was wrong and asked curiously.

“Robert, do you have your family all together?” Asked Shirou.

"What? Huh,.....” He nodded back, confused, but his face went completely rigid as Shirou continued.

“The town's people are after you. You'd better get out of here right now.”

"No, why?” It was Robert's only son who raised his voice in grief. It was fortunate that he had just returned home for his lunch break.

“Some people who want to return the war to its former glory are stirring up the townspeople to find a convenient target. I'm sorry, but you've got to give up on the furniture. Is there someplace we can take shelter?” Asked Shirou.

“No, no, no, no, no, no. We've been living here alone as a family for a long time.....”

“Then I'll accompany you to someplace safe. Don't worry, I will save the beastman.”
With a voice that was more powerful than words, the Merry family seemed to finally realize that this was not a mistake.

But.

"I'm sorry, but we can't go.” The old Robert and his wife turned to Shirou with a dejected voice.

“My wife has a bad leg and I cannot run as fast as she can.”

Natalia knew immediately what he meant: he was suggesting that the entrance to the town might be fortified by humans. They wanted the group to leave them behind because they didn't think they could get through. They know what fate awaits them if they stay.

"If we beat them all up, it won't be a problem. Let's go,” said Shirou flatly.

"Wait, Mr. Ogami. That will irritate them even more. They might follow us even if we leave the city. That will only increase the danger.” Natalia, repulsed by Shirou's wild idea, turned her face away from his disgruntled gaze and pondered for a moment. There must be a way to get the Merry family out safely. How to get out of town without hurting the humans and without being noticed..... What circumstances are available? What knowledge is available? Then, she had a flash of inspiration.

Natalia quickly turned her head and asked Shirou, “Mr. Ogami, do you know how to be a sheepdog?”

As the sun was setting, the town, which had been peaceful until late afternoon, was enveloped in a damp, soggy atmosphere. Many houses, not wanting to be associated with each other, dropped their armored doors on their windows or turned off their lights to keep their distance from the street. In the streets, men with lumber, fire sticks, and even hunting rifles walked about with a mixture of aggression and anxiety in their faces.

“All we have to do is get the dangerous man out of town. This was self-defense. This is self-defense," said the leader, naming his action as a "decision," an excuse to protect himself and his dignity. ”We just have to get rid of the beastmen.” The weapon was only to scare them. No harm done.”

That's what all of them were thinking, but a small number of people - and that's enough - could tell by their body language that they were clutching their weapons for a more gruesome purpose.

“Kill the beastmen.” Those few know that the sound of a single shot will send the crowd into a state of excitement, and they will brandish their weapons.

"I won't let you,” thought Natalia.
Having read their vicious thoughts, Shirou unleashed his own beastliness inside his worn-out cloak.

Beastification.

Gray hair swelled from the skin all over his body, his mouth split open up to his ears, and his twenty-eight healthy teeth were transformed into forty-two sharp blades.

The upper limit of the power generated by his four limbs skyrocketed, making the chimney of the house he was resting his hand on, feel as fragile as sandwork. His sense of smell had become so acute that he could assign name tags to every resident in the town and still have time to identify them.

Feeling more satisfied than uncomfortable that his nose was now so far ahead of his gaze, Shirou pulled his hood over his head and called out loudly to the crowd from on top of the roof. “The beastmen have escaped!”

At the same time as the humans cringed, five goats raced down the main street of the town.

“Baaaahhh.....”

Natalia shuddered as she heard a wave of angry shouts that sounded like cheers coming from outside the Merry house. It had begun. It was not like the town festivals that the people traditionally held. They were driving the beastmen away in a kind of man-hunting rampage.

“Let's go,” Natalia turned around in front of the door and looked around quickly at the faces of the five members of the Merry family behind her, who nodded back at her, before gently opening the door. There was no sign of life outside the house, and the crowd was roaring far away, like the rumbling of the earth. This way, they could get out of town without anyone seeing them. Natalia let out a small smile through her nervousness. It worked. The five goats were decoys. They had been caught by Shirou in secret from the semi-wild area outside the town. They were then released into the town at once for the humans to chase. Natalia remembered Shirou's reaction when she had suggested this.

"H-How dare you treat me like a sheepdog?!” Shirou exclaimed.

The look on his face was one of mockery and indignation at the lack of respect for the legendary silver wolf.

Natalia thought to herself that certainly, this was not a job for a beastly savior. A more solemn and overwhelming act would be more appropriate for a god.

Shirou pondered silently, "....," then said with a very smug look on his face. “I'm actually very good at that. If you want, I can run through every street in this town in one stroke.”

“No, thanks. No, thanks. Just follow the directions I give you.”

"Ehhh.....” Shirou hesitates.

“I've never seen that face before. Do you really want to do this?” Natalia asks.

“No, it's .....” Shirou pauses.

“What? You have an incredibly disappointed look on your face.” Natalia asks again.

Well, it worked, and with a face like that, the goats seemed to be well guided and it was totally helped by the ignorance of the humans this time. A beastman is not a perfect beast. They can only be a mixture of human and animal. However, the only people who knew this were the scientists who were at the beast camp, which stirred complicated feelings in Natalia. The people of this town didn't know enough about beastmen to not believe the ridiculous stories about the Merry family turning into goats and raiding the fields. There is only one person in the world who can completely turn into a beast. Oddly enough, that is the Silver Wolf. He is the only one in the world who can become a complete beast.

There was no one else in the alleyway where Natalia was leading the family. She thought that Shirou must be driving the goats around to draw away the people who had been blocking the entrances of the town. In the end, the plan was for the goats to escape from the town, giving the illusion that the Merry family had completely escaped. Then, the plan was to leave from the other side of the town while the goats had everybody’s attention.

“Calm down. There's no need to panic.”

Natalia turned around and checked to see if the family was still with her. Everyone was safe. There was only one more corner to turn. If they turned that corner, they would be able to see the exit.

But...

“There you are.....”

Natalia knew instantly that she was looking into the eyes of her strained opponent.

"Grandmother...” said the voice.

It was familiar. It was the woman from the store in the square who had served Natalia a large bowl of stew. Natalia was speechless. If the woman shouted out, some of the crowd chasing the goats might hear her and come running to their location. What would she do? Immediately after her body stiffened with hesitation, which was fatal in itself, Natalia saw the woman in front of her look around and make a small wave towards her.
“What are you standing there for? Why are you standing still?”

Natalia was surprised, but there was no time to pursue the matter further. She slipped by the woman's side.

"I'm sorry, grandmother. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help.....” Natalia heard the woman say in a distressed voice to Robert's old wife, whom her son was carrying.

“It's okay. Thank you for everything. Take care.” The old woman replied in a voice as gentle as a sunbeam as they walked past her.

Natalia thought to herself. She let them go. She was human, but she was on the side of the beastmen. She can't say that she would have wanted the woman to stop the crowd. They must have been afraid that if they were to interfere in any way, they would be beaten to a pulp on the spot. It was dangerous to even witness the escape.

“Why?.....” Natalia thought.

She wondered why the Merry family had to leave this town when there were people like them. Why can't beastmen live with humans? Without even the faintest hint of an answer to the questions that had arisen, Natalia and the family escaped from the town. After evacuating the family to a nearby forest, Natalia left Kuro to take care of them and went back to the town to get Shirou. It was hard to believe that he was still running around town, but since he hadn't shown up at the rendezvous time, she had no choice but to go look for him. Natalia alone would not be able to protect the family in case something happened.

There was no sign of anyone at the entrance to the town and no sounds of disturbance inside. Had the goats had also managed to escape .....? From the shadows, Natalia quietly peered into the town.

“Don't move.”

She heard a voice from behind her, and her heart leapt.

“Turn around slowly with your hands in the air.”

She did as she was told, raised her hands and turned around. There he was, with a sickly expression on his face and a gun at his side, the man from the Banishment Movement.
Natalia’s mind went completely blank. Her knees trembled, and she almost collapsed on the spot. She knew though, if she made such a big move, the man in front of her would easily pull the trigger. She was scared.

“What are you, a child? Are you a kid?” The man asked, sounding a little relieved.

She should have nodded. She should have nodded and said that she was a kid from the town. She could still fake it. Her normal self would have been able to think of something like that, but she couldn't. She was terrified. The man in front of her looked just like those scientists.

No matter how many times she begged and cried, she thought, they would not forgive her for anything, and he was just as cruel as those scientists.

“Why don't you tell me? Are you one of the beastmen of this town?”

He assumed her silence was an affirmation and grabbed her by the arm, as he took her into the town.

“I'll check with the people in town. If you're one of them, you'd better be prepared, okay?”

Instantly. The man with the lecherous smile on his face faded into the darkness.

"What are you prepared to do?...”

Just as she thought she heard the snarl of a ferocious beast; Natalia's arm was released as if she had been pushed away. On the other hand, the flapping feet of the man caught in midair grazed her nose, and she blinked. The man's head was grabbed and fished up with one hand by a gray wolf named Shirou.

"Bah, monster!” The man tried to pull a gun on him, but Shirou didn't show the slightest bit of agitation and knocked the man's gun away with his hand, as if he were brushing off an insect.

"Tell me what she needs to prepare herself for!” Shirou, snarls.

"AAAAAAH!”

Shirou’s face was close to the man's, and his barking was that of a raging animal. Natalia was not sure if she was going to be able to do it, but she had to try.

"Mr. Ogami...” She called out, thinking he was going to kill this human. She thought he would kill him the same way he had indiscriminately killed every moving human in that beastman camp, but when he glanced at her for a moment, she saw a certain reason in his eyes.

“Don't forget," his voice tells her.

“If you mess with the beastmen, the wolves will come. There won't be a next time.”

The man may have been trying to nod, but the motion did not carry over. After saying what he wanted to say, Shirou threw the man with one hand. The man jumped headfirst into the wall of a house, as if it were a joke, and was pierced with a powerful thud that reduced his height by several centimeters, before falling into a long, deep sleep.

"Are you alright, Natalia?” asked Shirou.

“Yes, ... Thank you.”

When he turned around, Shirou had already returned to his human form.

"You didn't turn into the silver wolf?” she asks.

In response to Natalia's question, Shirou turned his head down and mumbled, "I will not become the Silver Wolf anymore." It would be a long time before Natalia would know the true meaning of his words. For now, she just interpreted that he did not need the power of the Silver Wolf to beat this human.

Shirou asks her, “What happened to the family?”

“'They're all safe, and waiting in the forest with Kuro, as planned.”

“Well, that's good. I remembered that there is a hidden village of beastmen a little farther west. They should be able to welcome them there.”

“Are you sure? Thank God.....!”

“Yeah, really.....”

She was not proud of helping others, but as Shirou’s stern brow relaxed with relief, Natalia felt a small warmth light up in her heart. He may be a stubborn, eccentric, and insensitive representative of beastmen, but his desire to help the beastmen is more sincere and genuine than anyone else's. Natalia still hadn't figured out what she wanted to do in this big world, but for now, she will help him.

“Let's help the beastmen who are suffering.”

It was the right thing to do, Natalia thought, and she wanted to do it.

第二話 町に獣がやってくる

BNA ZERO
CHAPTER2

Chapter 2 - The Beast Is Coming To Town

There was no doubt that a fierce battle had taken place here. The roads were cut off by craters that looked as if they had been gouged out cleanly with a spoon, and in the fields on either side of the road, the scorch marks of war could be clearly seen branded into the withered crops. A car, abandoned on the shoulder of the road, looked like a shell with most of its parts missing, and the smell of burning clung to her nose as she walked by.

Natalia lifted her eyes from the pieces of iron scattered on the ground and set her sites on the city in the distance. Even from a distance, she could see that this small city was in ruins, and although there was no black smoke, she could easily imagine that it was overflowing with people who were devastated by the loss of their homes, possessions, and loved ones. She wondered what kind of life they were leading there now, and if there were any beastmen there.

"Hey! Look, look, look! These are foreign cigarettes, cigarettes! If you don't buy them now, you'll never get them!

"Hey there, Mister! How about some berries? Berries are good for smoky eyes. I promise you, so you can be sure!"

“What, no money, no job? We don’t have those either! I'm offering you doughnuts and coffee, so eat up and cheer up a little!”

Not only Natalia, but Shirou was also taken aback by the energy of the residents. Even if one discounted the fact that this was a market, the peoples’ faces were full of life. As they looked around the city, it was clear that all of the streets were covered with rubble and debris. Even the remaining houses were stained with soot and had broken windows. It took an hour just to find an intact building.

On the main street, there were charred cars and what looked like tanks lying around, not even a scab on the scars of war. However, when they looked closely, they could see that in the pile of rubble, small children were happily digging up and collecting bricks that they could use, as if they had been given small errands to run. Trucks loaded with crates of what appeared to be reconstruction equipment were driving nimbly around the cracked roads. The faces of the people on the street were light with anxiety, and even the laundry hanging in the windows of the apartments seemed to be fluttering with strength. It was blown away while Natalia was looking at it.

“There is something unusually cheerful here.....,” commented Natalia.

"Kaa....." replied Kuro, who had been perched on top of Natalia’s head for some time, in complete amusement.

“You think they’ve lost their minds after all this mess?”

“No way," responded, Natalia, to Shirou's rude comment, sighing as she followed, with her eyes, a boy running towards her with a wooden box of lemons. “They wouldn’t look like that if they had lost something.”

Suddenly.

'Whoa there, Mister. Yes you, Mister.”

When Natalia turned around at the sound of his voice, she saw a suspicious-looking man standing there with a small box under his arm and a familiar smile on his face.

“Me?” Shirou asked annoyed, as the man replied.

“Yes. I've been calling out to you for a while now, but you haven't turned around at all,” the man said as he came closer.

"Don't you want a cigarette, Mister? It's a valuable commodity, you know. Oh, you don't look like you need it. Then what about alcohol? I can't say it out loud, but it's Bavarian. I can't say it out loud, but it's Bavarian..... The enemies left it behind when they ran away.....”

Even without looking at the inconsistent products coming out of the crates, Natalia realized that the man was a black marketeer. He was not a legitimate merchant, but a citizen who had purchased diverted military supplies, or in some cases stolen goods, and was now taking advantage of the shortage to conduct their business secretly and without permission.

"How about a watch?” and then, "I've got a coat, too," he said, turning up the collar of his outer cloak to show the wool on the inside, in the style of a typical black marketeer who carries all his goods and wealth with him. He even had Rosé wine.

"How about this for you, young lady? Lipstick.”

"Lipstick.....?” responded Natalia.

Shifting his focus to Natalia, who was paying a little more attention to the product than the silent Shirou, the man took off the cap of the case with his hand and showed her the contents.

"Wow.....”

The pretty peach color attracted Natalia's attention. In her hometown, it was rare for beasts to wear make-up, but from the books in the village chief's house, she knew that humans used a variety of cosmetics on a daily basis.

As a girl who admired human culture, Natalia was naturally interested in such things. She was not interested in the primary colors that looked like they were squeezed out of wild berries,

but the more subtle and pale colors. She wondered how they could create such beautiful colors. It reminded her of a picture of a sophisticated woman in an old magazine she saw at the village chief's house. She wanted to try using such a thing for once.

“It’s only been used a little bit, I think. Heh, what do you think, little girl?

"Stop,” commanded Shirou.

When Natalia's hand was slightly extended, Shirou's voice came down from above and stopped her. She looked up at him and saw that he was not talking to her, but to the black marketeer.

"Do we look like we have the money? Get the hell out of here.”

"Oh, I didn't know that. I thought anyone who would carry a crow on their head in this day and age would either be dead or be someone very special, but I guess I was wrong.”

The man suddenly became brusque. “If you're not a customer, you're out of love," he said, but Natalia didn't feel any ill will, probably because he was a good-natured person at heart.

She knew that she should leave immediately before he realized that she was a beastman, but there was something she really wanted to ask, so she spoke up.

“Um, Mister. Why are the people here so cheerful? The city is such a wreck.”

“Oh, about that,” he said as the man put one of the cigarettes that had been for sale earlier in his mouth and lit it with a scarred lighter that looked like it would be very hard to sell. Someone’s initials were engraved on it, but they were hidden by scratches, making them unreadable.

The man continued, "It is true, the enemy occupied the city, dropped bombs and left tanks all over the place, but each time we ran for cover in the nearby forest - you can see it from here. That big forest. That's why there were so few deaths. As a result not many people are grieving, so everyone is in good spirits.”

“In the forest? Is that all that saved you?”

“W-Well, we escaped pretty far into the woods.”

The man's voice sounded slightly like he was avoiding answering. Natalia questioned him more, becoming more curious.

“That forest looks very rugged, even from here, and it must have been very cold. Wouldn't it have been more dangerous if you had run deeper?

The man growled a little, frowned, and exhaled deeply from his cigarette.

“You may not have any money, but I guess you’re not normal after all. Yeah, that's right. If a large number of people had fled deep into the forest, there would have been a lot of lost people and children. ..... They saved us at that time.”

“Who did?” asked Natalia.

“The beastmen.”

Natalia and Shirou looked at each other in surprise.

“There is a village of beastmen deep in the forest, which some of the people in the city, especially the old people, know about. That's why even the hunters don't go in there any more than they have to, it's taboo, but with the air strikes..... hiding at the entrance of the forest was not enough to make people feel safe. They had to run deeper into the forest. If anyone who is not familiar with the forest does that, of course they will get lost. When they were shivering in the cold and resigned to the fact that they had no choice but to die, they suddenly ran into people. The beastmen.”

The man's voice was a little strained, as if he'd seen it all before, but it also had a hint of gratitude in it. Perhaps he was one of the ones who had gotten lost.

“I was surprised. I was expecting them to look like beasts on two legs, but in fact, they look just like humans. They can shapeshift, you know, just like the legendary werewolves. After we evacuated, they started to help us, and the people around here survived the war almost unscathed.....”

"By any chance, do the people here still interact with beastmen?” Natalia asked hopefully.

The man looked more bitter than the cigarette smoke he puffed and murmured, "You’ve got to be kidding. Who would want to be with those people?”

Before Natalia could ask him what he meant, the black marketeer quickly packed up his goods and hurried away.

"You ungrateful bastard,” Shirou snorted in annoyance, but Natalia suspected that there was more to it than that. She could see the black marketeer's back as he slipped into the crowd, looking smaller in the distance as he moved further away from where they were standing.

Suddenly.

"Are you beastmen?” Surprised by the abrupt, swashbuckling remark, Natalia turned toward the voice as if she had been exposed.

A large man with short, uneven hair was standing there. His chin was rounded, but his eyes were sharp and his lips were thick, giving him a somewhat oppressive look. The brown jacket he was wearing was new and looked to be two digits more expensive than Shirou's faded cloak.

“I knew it. You’re both beastmen.”

The man's face smiled, its roughness as if he were the embodiment of wildness itself.

How did you notice us? Natalia thought.

Her heart was beating uneasily in her chest. Although the black marketeer's words were not the whole story, the position of the beastman was always in danger. She didn't know what the humans would do to them if they found out.

“Are you a beastman too?” When Shirou asked, he received a strong answer.

“Yes!”

"Oh,……”

Natalia was appalled, but at the same time she realized how panicked she had been.
Beastmen have their own unique smell. Humans can't distinguish the smell, but beastmen can recognize it, even if the beastman in question is in their human form.

That's how the man identified them, and that is why Natalia should have noticed him in the first place.

"My name is Garte. I haven’t seen your faces around here, are you traveling?”

"Well, something like that.”

Seeing Shirou calmly interacting with him, Natalia was very glad that he was there with her.

This man, Garte, was very similar to the beastmen in Natalia's hometown. They were rough, crass, a pain in the ass, and they always tried to solve things with brute force. Suddenly asking such a question like that in human land? It was the height of insensitivity.

However, she was curious that a beastman was walking around so openly in such a place.

She had thought the black marketeer meant what he said earlier, that the beastmen and this city didn't interact with the humans anymore……

Suddenly, at that moment, Natalia’s stomach rumbled loudly. She blushed and held her stomach, but Garte’s explosive laughter told her that it was no use.

"If you're hungry, I'll feed you good food. Come with me."

Natalia and Shirou looked at each other and then followed him as he walked through the bustling streets of the market. Garte was completely unconcerned about the flow of people coming towards him, and proceeded to push them back.

Natalia had a bad feeling at this point, as she saw some people scowling in annoyance, and others who were about to open their mouths to complain, distorting their mouths and running aside when they saw Garte's face.

Not long after, her bad feeling became a reality. Garte stopped in front of a fruit stand, snatched a colorful peach from a crate, and bit into it.

"Yummy!"

The sweet smell that spread from the bite reached her nose, but Natalia had no time to get drunk on it.

"Hey, wait, how much is that!?"

"What?"

Looking down at Natalia curiously with a sideways glance, Garte completely ate up the peach in his second bite, licking the juice from his hand.

"What's the price? You guys should just eat. Today's peaches are especially good."

Natalia was so shocked that she looked at the owner of the fruit shop. At first glance, the old human shopkeeper seemed to be smiling, but his cheeks and eyes looked unnatural, as if they were being pulled by an invisible thread.

"Don't you want it? It's so good. "

Natalia hurriedly stopped Garte from reaching for a second one.

"Wait a minute. This is a place where you pay money to shop, you know!?" Natalia exclaimed.

"So, what the hell is that?" responded Garte crassly.

"Money, you know, is like what you give over there at..... This peach has a price, right? You see, the numbers on the wooden box. It's....." she tried to explain.

"Oh, what a pain in the ass. Come on, there's so many of them."

Natalia knew from her experience back home what was going through Garte's narrow mind as he frowned in annoyance.

I'm just taking a little.

That was the extent of his understanding. He didn't even have the common sense to know that you shouldn't take something that belongs to someone else and make it your own.

“The shopkeeper will get angry with us for doing that.”

“Why don't you just beat them up?” asked Garte.

“It's the 20th century!”

However, to Natalia’s horror, such a century-old argument goes around every day among beastmen. If you are a beast, you are expected to defend your property to the death with your own strength or wisdom. As long as this shopkeeper doesn't do that, the beastman will come to the ridiculous conclusion that it's okay to do it.

Good or bad, that is what common sense is to the beastmen. After pushing Garte out through the back of the market, Natalia ran back to the shopkeeper alone.

“I'm sorry. Is this enough for that peach?”

Natalia held out the only coin she had. It was the one that Kuro had found some time ago. The shopkeeper looked at her with surprise.

"Are you sure, little crow girl?” asked the man.

“I’m sure that guy has probably taken peaches from here many times before.....” responded Natalia.

She thought a single coin was far from enough, but the shopkeeper smiled softly and accepted it.

“Thank you. Your kindness is more than enough,” then he furrowed his brow in concern.

“Are you going to be okay? You can't treat that man like that. He's a beastman.”

"..... Yeah. I know.” Natalia replied bitterly, unable to honestly confess that she was also a beastman.

“Is he from the forest?” she followed up.

“Yes. During the war, he saved me many times.....” responded the shopkeeper.

According to the owner, after the war, beastmen began to come down to the city. At first, the residents welcomed them as they had saved their lives, but as the savage behavior of the beastmen became clear, the residents' relationship with them gradually became strained.
The beastmen would not only eat and drink without paying, but also take clothes and reconstruction goods without permission, assault residents, and break things. There is a limit to the amount of lawlessness that people will tolerate, no matter how grateful they are. Nowadays, the city is clearly divided into two main groups: those who are angry at the beastmen and those who are frightened of them, and few people are grateful to them.

"What an idiot....." Natalia bemoaned as she covered her face with one hand.

There was no exaggeration in what the shopkeeper had said, because Natalia knew this was how beastmen were every day.

That pretentious jacket was probably taken from some store without permission. The worst part is that not only Garte, but probably all the other beastmen who came down to the city, are unaware that they are doing anything wrong.

They take with force and refuse with force. They are convinced that the simple rules of the beastmen will work in human cities. It's okay if it's in their own village, especially since beastmen tend to gather together in similar animalistic groups. Large and strong beastmen like Garte are more likely to form a society that relies on their strength. However, this was not the case with humans.

Natalia returned to Garte with a frown on her face. He was sitting on a crate, chatting with Shirou, and seemed to be puzzled as to why Natalia was screaming at him.

Natalia turned to him again, "Listen, Mr. Garte, problems in human society can't be solved entirely by brute force."

"Oh, yeah? If you're strong, you're..... great, right?"

"That's so foolish! People are in the same position whether they are strong or weak. You can't take what belongs to your opponent without permission, and just because you're strong doesn't mean you can wield your power."

"Why? If you have power, that means you can use it, right?"

"No, sir! Everyone sets rules and lives by them first and foremost! If you continue to be selfish like you are now, you and your village will be attacked one day! What are you going to do when that happens?"

"Defeat them!" yelled Garte.

“Stop it!” squeaked Natalia loudly and unintentionally in frustration.

Natalia's animalistic screech was met with a chuckle and smile from Garte, who covered his ears in response, "You're a noisy little thing, aren't you? What are you, a duckling or something?”

“I’m a naked mole rat,” Natalia fumed.

“So you’re a bald rat?”

“I’m not bald! I’m naked!”

When she shouted back at him, he waved his hand in front of her face as if he was trying to scare off an insect.

"It doesn't matter. That's how we've always done it, and that's how we're going to do it. We're not going to let anyone get in our way.”

With that, he walked away with a carefree gait that did not signal any kind of reflection on his past actions at all.

“I don't know what to say.....” lamented Natalia.

"All beastmen are like that.”

Shirou spoke, As Natalia gritted her teeth.

“A strong man can defend his territory. The one with the loudest voice can show himself off farther. The habits of the beasts that our ancestors revered are still alive in our hearts. Don't worry about it.”

"But ……” Natalia started.

“I told him earlier to stay away from this city. As long as humans and beastmen live separately, there won't be any problems. I don't know if he'll heed my words, though.”

Was it really as simple as that?

Natalia wondered if this silver wolf, who had lived for a thousand years, had properly grasped the current flow of the world. She could not discount the long years he had spent in this world, but she still felt that they were living in an unprecedented time where vague rules of intuition are useless.

Through this war, the world has been stirred up like a pot of stew.

People from different countries fought all over the world, and races and emotions got mixed up. The beastmen were caught up in it. Can they return to how things were? Natalia felt that It will be difficult for beastmen to keep their distance from humans going forward.

And yet ....., she thought

Beastmen and humans have such different ways of thinking. What would happen to the beastmen, who are outnumbered, if the humans saw us purely as the enemy?

Even if they continue to help the beastmen on a haphazard basis as they do now, they will never be able to keep up.

“I'm going to go talk to that man again. I'll go talk to him again and make sure he obeys the town's rules,” declared Natalia.

"Beastmen have their own rules, they don't need to conform to humans.”

Shirou’s words became tangled in her legs as Natalia started after the man, causing her to stop.

“Are you on the side of the humans, by any chance?” Shirou asked.

“It’s because humans are more...”

As she was about to argue with him, the coldness of fresh water spread in her chest. It wasn't because she felt fear at Shirou's increasingly stern expression. It was because the color of the white coats of the scientists at the beast camp flickered in her mind.

Humans are a more prosperous race than beastmen. They are more numerous, have more advanced technology, and have a more mature society. If contact with them could no longer be avoided, then the beastmen would have to adapt to the humans. However, humans are cruel and brutal. They captured and killed a lot of beastmen. Beastmen would not have done such a cruel thing. Beastmen are violent, but they don't kill needlessly. There is no need to emulate humans.....

Why.....?, Natalia shook her head weakly.

Her anger and hatred were interfering with her normal thinking.

She should have been able to think better and find a more honest way to deal with the situation, but the memories of pain and anger prevented her from doing so. Before she knew it, Natalia was standing on her haunches, breathing darkly under the weight of her own body, and wondering if this was how Shirou, the Silver Wolf, felt.

A thousand years of accumulated memories and emotions, rejecting humans and everything they have created, while Natalia was trying to be like them.

Garte's back was no longer visible in the crowd, and Natalia's blurred vision could only see the flow of people that he had pushed aside slowly returning to normal.

Later, she could feel the heat of the sugar-filled coffee she had swallowed spreading to the edges of her cold body. The naked mole rat was revered by her ancestors. Although they are mammals, they do not have the ability to regulate their body temperature, which allows them to operate with little energy. Naked mole rat beastmen also possess this characteristic, and even in their human forms, are able to reduce their physical consumption at the trivial cost of being cold.

Delicious……, she thought.

The doughnuts, now three quarters eaten, were sweeter than any sweets she had back home. She was aware that she had already taken in enough calories to meet her needs, but she was sure she could eat at least one more.

After all, human food is good…….

It had been two days since they had arrived in the city. After spending the night in a lodging facility offered to residents who had lost their homes, Natalia and Shirou went out to the main street near the market.

Being a large city, there were more than one or two restaurants that offered free meals. As Natalia looked around, she saw people everywhere who were just like them, eating donuts and drinking coffee to satisfy their hunger. They were blowing on cigarettes that they had procured from somewhere else to pass the time after dinner.

"Hello, little crow girl."

She moved her eyes from the street to the sound of the voice and saw a familiar face. It was the black marketeer.

“Ah, the Mister, too. We meet again.”

The black marketeer sat down next to Natalia, greeting her as well as Shirou, who was standing against the wall of the store. He took a bite of the donut in his hand and sipped his coffee.

“That….. hits the spot.” said the merchant.

"Mister, you have money, why are you eating that?” ask Natalia curiously.

"Shh. It's okay, They’re giving it away for free. Everyone does this.” responded the merchant.

Natalia thought quietly to herself. She really wanted to share some of the food they had with the family of goat beastmen she and Shirou had met in the past. The Merry family had since been accepted into a distant beastmen's hideout and had parted ways. She wondered if the family was doing well. She figured that such gentle people, who grew up in a human town, may be at a loss when dealing with beastmen with no sense of decency, but at least it was better than going back to their hometown.

“Kaa!” cried out Kuro, suddenly.

Natalia looked across the boulevard and saw a large number of people walking towards them, spread out horizontally across both the sidewalks and roadway.

"Hey, hey, there it is.....”

Natalia was speechless as she listened to the black marketeer's strained voice and looked at the people walking near the front of the procession. There were women with their hair shorn. The next few men, who may have originally been handsome, had their shirts torn here and there, and their faces were covered with blue bruises and blood.

They were followed by a back row of dark-eyed people. They were armed with wooden and iron sticks and were pounding the ground nearby with their weapons to intimidate those in the front row who had fallen behind after tripping. It was a scene she had seen in many places where there had been warfare.

"Traitors.....” Natalia shuddered at the unearthly voice of a nearby stranger.

In a low voice, she asked the black marketeer. “Is there a banishment movement going on here too?”

"Banishment .....? What on earth is that? Is that they call it out there?” responded the black marketeer.

He then looked coldly at the crowd that had somehow taken over the street.

“They're the ones who live on the other side of the city. During the war, the enemy's headquarters was over there, and various buildings and infrastructure were seized. The fighting during the liberation was terrible. People couldn't evacuate because they were too far from the forest, so many people died in the fighting. Security is still very bad.”

The women walking in the front had small babies in their arms. Some of the women had large bellies. Natalia already knew what this meant. These women were having children with the enemy.

The women, in contrast to the grieving men behind them, were glaring back at the crowd on the side of the road with sharp eyes. They looked like the eyes of a beast protecting its own child.

"Traitor!”

“Fuck you!”

From every corner of the street came curses that stung Natalia’s skin.

He must have read her emotions from her blood drained face. The voice of the black marketeer crawled on the ground, “No matter how small the damage was, there were people in this town who lost something. I just can't forgive those people who were playing it cool with the enemy while we were having it so bad.”

He concluded, pouring a cup of bitter coffee down his throat without looking at the sweet donuts.
“They were desperate for survival, too. The women may have genuinely loved the enemy men. The children are innocent....., but such smart words won't get us anywhere. This is a more primitive and emotional thing. If anyone can suppress this, they are a graduate of the human race.....”

The expressions on the faces of the people on the side of the road watching the procession were complicated. Some people cheered and cursed, while others just watched the proceedings bitterly.

The one thing they all had in common though is that no one said “Stop.” They all knew what would happen if they did. Natalia did not say anything, and of course Shirou was silent. However, there was a hint of spitefulness in his demeanor, perhaps because he felt uncomfortable with this scene in his own way.

The procession passed right in front of Natalia and the others. As the black marketeer looked down, Natalia also looked down at her own toes.

That's when it happened. It was at that moment that a figure interrupted the slow-moving, muddy procession of evil.

"Hey, ..., what?”

When Natalia looked, she almost dropped her cup of coffee. That pretentious jacket. It was that beastman, Garte.

“Hey. What's all the fuss about, huh?”

As he kept asking without hesitation, the beastman's voice drew the attention of the people in the crowd. A member of the angry crowd answered him.

"These people are traitors who have been in league with the enemy. We're going to go to the square now, and we're going to bring them all to justice."

Natalia saw clearly that Garte's eyes were blinking in wonder. Then he must have thought of something. He clapped his hands and said in a very lucid voice, "Oh, so when they were strong, you were too scared to touch them, but now that they're weak, you're all going to take them down. That's good. Hahaha!"

There was an explosion of emotion, as Natalia wondered if there was anything worse he could have said to pour more fuel on the fire.

"What the hell! Are you saying we're cowards?" The man who had explained the situation grabbed Garte in a fit of rage.

"You're gonna get it, you bastard!"

It must have been reflex. Garte's barking tiger hair spread across his face, merging with the body hair that was rising from the chest of his open shirt, completely covering his skin tone. The man's eyes widened at the sudden expansion of the person he had grabbed, as he was pushed by Garte, who sent him flying at least two meters horizontally. The man tumbled to the ground with his friends.

Fortunately, he was only slightly injured thanks to his comrades who were now trapped underneath him, and he shouted loudly to Garte while holding his aching shoulder.

"Monster!"

"What the hell? What kind of monster is a tiger?" Garte's voice was as angry as a man's, and the whole place was in an uproar.

"A beastman!"

"It's a tiger beastman!"

The women who had been trapped by the crowd escaped during the commotion, and the men who tried to follow were beaten to death with wooden and iron sticks by those of the crowd who noticed.

However, the hardened eyes of the crowd were mostly focused on the beastly Garte alone.
It was not a march anymore.

Natalia spotted a large sack of flour in a crate by a store behind her and shouted out,

"Mr. Ogami!”

It was almost at the same time that Shirou, who had instantly guessed Natalia's intentions from the direction of her eyes, took and threw the bag of flour into the street, just as the first man who had been pushed pulled a pistol from his pants pocket.

He must have ripped the bag open with his fingertips the moment he grabbed it. The flour that went flying between Garte and the crowd created a white smoke screen just a moment before the pistol shot went off.

Shirou quickly rushed into it and pulled out Garte, who had turned into a powdery white tiger. Natalia, who had secured an escape route to a back alley on the side of the building, waved loudly for them to come follow her and then they quickly left the area.

"Hey! What the hell was that guy doing, he shot at us out of nowhere!”

Garte ranted while holding his shoulder. Fortunately, the bullet seemed to have only grazed his flesh. There was a small amount of blood and scorch marks on his fur, but the fact that he was running around screaming like an idiot showed that he was not seriously injured.

“Did I say something wrong!? I'm just telling you what I saw!”

Natalia laughed at him as he continued to yell at her while they were running away.

“You're right. I don't think you said anything wrong. It's just that you were extremely airheaded.”

She wondered why she felt Garte’s out-of-place comment back there was like a breath of fresh air.

“I was giving them a compliment in the first place! It's a basic rule of hunting to target your opponent when they're weak! I'm not sure if they've ever heard of this, but I'm sure you've heard of it!?”

“..... Mr. Garte, has anyone ever told you that you are losing it by the way you talk?”

They ran through the back alleys and straight out of the city. It was a mad dash by three healthy beastmen. There was no one who could catch up with them.

After sending Garte off into the forest, Natalia and Shirou quietly returned to the main street. They had a hunch that something was about to go horribly wrong. They were right. Even before they could return to their original spot, their ears were greeted by the sound of many angry voices.

"Don't let the invaders get away with it! Don't tolerate the beastmen! This time, we must protect this city with our own hands!”

“Their lair is in the forest! Everyone, take your weapons!”

“Drive the beastmen out of the forest! Or better yet, take their village! It's time to punish them for the way they've been treating us!”

The main street looked like a boiling pot of anger. The people who had been denouncing the traitors earlier had turned their anger toward a different entity, the beastmen, and it exploded, engulfing the residents who had been frustrated by their rough behavior.

The situation was further aggravated by the men who seemed to be black marketeers lurking around the city. They were selling leftover weapons from the war to people. They justified the sale of the bulky firearms and cutlery as self-defense and weapons of freedom, and took the opportunity to sell them to the angry crowds. They are certainly sober and know that the beastmen are not evil enough to warrant such weapons.

When Natalia spotted the black marketeer she had been chatting with earlier among the profiteers, she angrily ran up to him.

"Mister, what are you doing?

A cunning face turned to her and shouted.

“Oh, crow girl! I'm in the middle of a big day, stay away from danger!”

“That's not what I meant! Do you even know what you're doing?” snapped Natalia.

The tone of his voice dropped unexpectedly when he heard her words, “I don't have a choice.”

His reply and the dark look in his eyes made Natalia jump.

“I warned them over and over again. I taught them over and over again. I even paid, on their behalf, many times! They never listened! They said it was too much trouble, that they didn't care about humans!”

Natalia listened, stunned.

“It's over! The only thing left to do is to make him understand by force. They're only animals, that's what they are! The only way to discipline them is to hurt them!”

A faint sense of loneliness seeped into her sly face, depriving Natalia of the words to reply.

“Let's go.”

As Shirou grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her closer, she had no strength left to resist. This time it was the beastmen's fault. The beastmen were to blame for this incident. They had not tried to understand the humans, and had allowed the relationship to become so complicated.

However, the reaction of the humans was also too strong. She didn't expect them to target the entire village. It was not enough to save one or two people as they had done in the past. An unprecedented rescue on a massive scale was needed.

It didn't take much effort to find the beastman village deep in the forest. The beastly Shirou's nose was able to track the faint scent of blood from the fleeing Garte as accurately as if he were pulling a string.

“The humans are coming with their weapons. Prepare to flee now!”

The inhabitants of the village took the sudden appearance of the wolf beastman's words with surprising candor. They must have heard the story from Garte, who had returned just before.

Then all hell broke loose.

"Pack your things, pack your things!”

“What's with this wardrobe? It won't go out the door! How did I get it into the house?”

“Food, how do we get food out the house ..... ah, let's stuff our cheek pouches. Good thing I'm a chipmunk beastman!”

There were voices of anger and lamentation as people were preparing cargo here and there.

“Why are the humans attacking us?”

"I don't know. I don't know. I heard they're angry about something.”

“Did I do something wrong? I just got some clothes I liked.”

“I've only ever hit people I didn't like.”

“It's strange.....”

As she helped the beastmen pack up their things, Natalia couldn't help but think about this exchange.

No one understands the origin of this situation, after all. It was true that the anger of the town's people was triggered from accidental circumstances, and that they were taking it out

on the beastmen. However, the actions of the beastmen in this village had also placed a heavy burden on the humans. Garte's comment was just the straw that broke the camel's back.

If I had come here earlier, could I have stopped this? Natalia asked herself and shook her head without pausing to think.

It was impossible. If she had tried to persuade the beastmen to change their behavior, they would not have listened at all, just like the black marketeer's struggle. That's what beastmen are. That's what beastmen are all about. It was only when they were helpless that they turned their heads and said, "Huh?" It was only when they were helpless that they turned their heads and said, "What's wrong?"

They are overwhelmingly opportunistic. They are an unthinking species. Their only saving grace is that they have the grace to flee immediately when they realize they are at a disadvantage.

Natalia looked around.

There was not a single beastman who insisted on fighting to protect the village. It was probably a wild survival strategy born from the fact that their bodies were strong enough to survive even after they had escaped. There is a difference between them and the people who are still shouting in the main streets to protect their city.

But.

"Wow, I have so much stuff I can't pack it all! Somebody help me!"

"Shut up, I don't care! We're shorthanded too!"

“Hey, man! Help me with mine first! You can do yours later, right?!”

Brilliant, zero coordination.

The big and strong beastmen had built their houses large enough to accommodate their post-transformation physiques, and they were taking their time to pack. The smaller beastmen, on the other hand, were quicker to pack their belongings, but were hampered by the rowdy beastmen and were unable to escape.

“What are you going to do about this, Mr. Ogami?……”

As Natalia watched the scene, she called out to Shirou for help, but he made it sound like it was no big deal.

“The only way to quickly get away is to take the beastmen who are ready. If it comes down to it, I'll hold off the humans.”

"I'm telling you, that's going to irritate them even more...” replied Natalia.

She was just about to say something when.

"Hey, hey!”

Suddenly, there was a voice calling out to Natalia and Shirou. -It was Garte who was calling out to them from in front of the biggest house of all.

“What is it?”

As Natalia and the others rushed over to him, he spoke with a weak look on his face that he had never shown before.

“My wife was so startled by this whole thing that she went into labor! You have to do something!”

“What? You have a wife of your own, and you're just wandering around town?” exclaimed Natalia.

“I was waiting for her to give birth, but she didn't, so I figured I should cause I was bored.....”

“You drunken cat! Get out of the way!” demanded Natalia.

Natalia ran into the house, crossing in front of Garte, who quickly stepped aside. In the back bedroom, she saw a woman with a pale face grunting and groaning. Natalia was also a beastwoman. In her hometown, she had witnessed a birth. She knew at once that she was not a moment too soon. As she ran back outside, Natalia raised her voice.

“You drunken cat, please go get the midwife, is she gone?!”

“No, she's probably still here, but she's probably getting ready to run away.....”

“Shut up, don't be so auspicious now, go!” shouted Natalia.

“Fuck!” exclaimed Garte.

She then immediately shouted to Shirou, “Mr. Ogami. I want everyone to stop working for a moment! We're all in disarray and we're not doing a good job! There's still time. I'll take charge!”

"Understood,” responded Shirou.

Natalia stood before the assembled beastmen shortly after Garte had brought her a well-built midwife who was large enough to be his rival. There was frustration on everyone's face that the work had been stopped, but it was one of the habits of the beastmen to obey the loudest creature for some reason. Natalia raised her voice as loudly as she could.

“We can't just run away in small groups. We're all going to move out together!”

The beastmen's eyes rolled around as they immediately looked at the villagers next to them. Even though they were all living in one place, the largest unit they were used to protecting was their own family at most. A whole village working together was out of the question. However, Natalia had an idea.

“If we all work together, we won't lose anything but our homes! We can even rebuild the same village in another place!”

Even though they don't have much of a spirit of mutual aid, they understood the advantages of working in groups. Taking advantage of their simple mindset, Natalia urged them to unite.

“But come on, if we do that, the humans will catch us,” said a weak voice from one of the beastmen.

Another one of the beastmen also spoke up weakly, “Don't worry. The humans won't attack until tomorrow morning.”

"They won't come in the night?” asked another.

Natalia nodded and answered the question, "Yes. They think we are like animals. Humans can't see well at night, so they know they'll be at a disadvantage if they venture out into the mountains at night.”

“But a night is a short time, and we won't make it until tomorrow morning,” said the anxious voice of another beastman.

Natalia responded with a faint smile on her face, “No problem. I will make this village disappear by the end of the night.”

The forest fires that had been visible from the top of the city tower gradually faded as the sky turned white, the smoke becoming indistinguishable from the clouds. It seemed that the beastmen had built a fire to keep watch over the night. The city folk figured it was a good thing that they hadn't attacked unwisely.

They were up against beastmen who had been nesting in the forest for centuries. Hunting in the mountains at night was a risk, and as they waited until dawn to attack, their biggest

concern was that the people's enthusiasm would wane in the meantime. *This will work,* they thought.

“You have that look on your face, kid.” said a man

As he stepped down from the tower and saw the man's mouth hanging open in front of the armed people from a distance, he uttered a call that was impossible to hear and pulled the hood of his cloak and over his eyes, as he blended noiselessly into the crowd.

"Are you all ready? Let's go!”

"Oh!"

The man from earlier, who looked more like a righteous commander fanning the crowd than a leader, shouted out loudly, and the humans rose to their feet, stomping their shoes and entering the forest with authority. Leading the way was a hunter who knew the mountains well. He was followed by a group of men carrying what appeared to be military-style rifles. Carrying them on their shoulders, they appeared to be veterans who had returned from the battlefield. The agitator was there as well, but his hands were a little unsteady with his gun, as if he had not participated in the war despite his efforts to incite the people.

The largest number of people at the end of the line were the young people of the city. They were only allowed to carry small knives or pistols, and their shoulders, which had been angry before we entered the forest, were slowly drooping as the darkness of the trees grew thicker. It seemed that half of them were dropping out of the group on their own without doing anything.

While hiding in the midst of these young men, Shirou watched the movements of the hunter leading the way. At first, the hunter's feet had been moving deeper and deeper without hesitation, but at a certain point, he started to stop more often. The air that drifted through the trees was different. This is a space where humans rarely enter, where the primeval forest has its own rules. According to the story, it was the beastmen who guided them to the village when they entered the forest after escaping the war. They figured they must have met around here.

"What are you looking for?”

Shirou heard the man behind him ask the hunter a question.

“It's an eye symbol. It's right here.”

Shirou saw a thin string tied to a branch of a tall tree that was darkening the forest sky. It was not something that the beastman had prepared, so the hunter must have attached it on his own.

The words of the beastman girl with the intelligent look in her eyes unknowingly came back to his mind, *Humans don't know everything about the forest, we don't know everything about the forest, we just know the points that are easy to remember and connect them together.*

You're right, Natalia, Shirou thought.

Shirou chuckled behind his hood as he kept pace with the group. That means that this group is already under her control.

They walked a long way, although they took a few breaks along the way, the journey was much steeper than they had imagined, and the fatigue on the faces of the humans was growing.
Two-thirds of the group of young people still remained, but this was not because they had guts, but because they were desperate not to go home alone.

"Hey, are you sure we're going the right way?" The ring-leader of the group, his forehead covered with sweat, asked the hunter.

"Yeah. There are footprints of adults and children here and there, and some of the branches of the shorter trees are broken. This is evidence that many people have passed through here recently. We're getting closer to the fire that we saw last night. Stay alert."

The leader's arm tightened around his rifle, indicating that a battle was imminent. More walking. As the green of the forest grew darker, the moisture in the air increased. Suddenly, the hunter called a halt to his followers.

“Look. These footprints.”

On the softened soil were the footprints of a large animal.

“They look like bears, but they're..... bipedal.”

“A beastman.....!”

The footprints led deeper into the forest.

When the group swallowed their saliva and looked ahead, they immediately saw that there was a light shining deep into the forest. It meant that there was an open space.

“It’s too quiet, ... they could be lurking around. Watch out for noises.”

The men became more cautious and moved forward with their guns ready to fire at any moment. The light-filled square was only ten meters away, five meters .....three meters .....arrival.

“What the hell is this.....!?”

The men were left standing in a circle. There were no houses, no beastmen, nothing but a small space with a few traces of simple fires.

“It's gone. The village is gone, they're gone.....”

The hunter muttered in dismay.

They hear the crunching sound of twigs being stepped on and turn their guns around, only to see the thick tail of a fox fleeing into the bushes.

Were they being bewitched? ..... The men's puzzled faces showed that they didn't even have the energy to be angry about anything anymore. The forest is steep and deep, and the darkness is so dim that even just walking in it would kill you. The tension was followed by a sense of release from their feeling that they were being spurred on. They wondered what they were really doing, their eyes filled with gratitude for being alive, as they listened to the chirping of the birds around them.

The plan was a great success.

After watching from a short distance away, Shirou snatched the last of the markers the hunter had relied on from a branch and retreated into the darkness of the forest. He didn’t know how far they'll get back without the markers, but he didn't care if they got into trouble, at least it will buy the beastmen some time. It took the group more than half a day to get this location. The beastmen would have finished packing and left by the time they had figured out what happened. At least for the plan Natalia had scraped together from scratch, it was more than enough time.

It was the rabbit beastman right next to her who told her that someone was coming from behind, running through the forest at a ridiculous speed. Natalia, who immediately recognized the creature from her words and understood that it couldn't be human, waved at the gray beastman she saw in the gap between the trees.

“Mr. Ogami!”

It was, after all, Shirou, who had hidden himself among the humans in case of an emergency.

“Listen up, everyone. The mission was a success. The humans are in the middle of nowhere, and are no longer a threat.”

"Ooooh!" The beastmen, who were walking in a line, cheered.

"There's no way they can catch up to us at this point. Get some rest."

The beastmen let go of their carts and backpacks and quickly surrounded Natalia, the person who had done the most for them.

"Thank you. We couldn't have done it without you!"

I didn't think we'd actually be able to move the whole village. It's amazing!

Natalia blushed at the praise.

Natalia was a small, weak beastman. Even in her hometown, she had been ridiculed by the larger beasts - which were most of the inhabitants of her village - and had never received any praise. It was the first time she had been recognized like this.

"It wasn't just me...."

The voice that came out of her desire for more of this applause was surprisingly humble and righteous, even to herself.

"It's a result of the combined efforts of all the people who helped Miss Reed and those who carried out the big loads in the meantime!"

"That's right. You guys are capable of amazing things, aren't you? I'm amazed!"

Garte, holding his wife with a baby on her chest in a chair strapped to his back, stroked the heads of the small beastmen in turn. The rabbits, mice, and other beasts were good at running away. On the other hand, there were foxes and weasels that were good at following traces. In the village, there were many large carnivorous beastmen, and the small animal beastmen lived in the corners. Naturally, they were treated poorly and always drew the short end of the stick.

This time, however, they were able to fool even the eyes of the hunters, who were used to hiking in the mountains, thanks to their advice on how to look at things from both sides, the ones running away and the ones chasing. The subtlety of their work, which could never be duplicated by big, rough beasts, gradually widened the margin of error and lured even the most experienced hunters to the wrong place.

"Oh no. But you guys are the reason I didn't give up on the furniture....."

"It's hard to make everything from scratch again, so this is a big help......."

This time, the large beasts, who were the best at fighting, focused on carrying the luggage. In Natalia's plan, which did not involve any bloodshed, their monstrous strength was used peacefully.

"That's good to know. Hahahaha!”

Garte and the others laughed as the rabbit beastmen returned the compliment of their contribution. Natalia let out a sigh of admiration. What had happened this time had been a surprise to her as well.

Beastmen working together to accomplish a single thing. This was actually a rare occurrence and was actually not an easy thing to do.

It was definitely her who was in charge, but she didn't expect it to go so well. She never thought that these selfish, self-centered, and uncooperative beastmen could cooperate so well and to such an extent. It was as if they're smart people.

Beastmen are not helpless beings, she thought. *They just have a fundamentally uncivilized way of thinking. It's just that they are not used to working together.*

"Ogami,” suddenly, a gentle voice came from the chair behind Garte's back. It was Garte's wife,
Fouko. She was draping her husband's jacket over her body and the baby as a blanket.

“Thank you so much for what you did. If it hadn't been for you two, I wouldn't have been able to give birth to this baby safely. I'm really grateful.”

She looked exhausted after giving birth, but she was too beautiful to be a drunken cat. “I didn't do anything," Shirou shook his head and gave Natalia a tap on the shoulder from behind.

“It's all thanks to her.”

"Hey, hey, Mr. Ogami...”

“Thank you, Natalia.” said Fouko softly.

Natalia was embarrassed by Fouko's gentle gaze, so she lowered her eyes and said, "N-No problem.....”

“Natalia, It's a girl. Can I name her Natalie?”

"O-oh, you want to name her after me.....?”

“Yes, I do, because I want her to be smart and strong like you.” responded Fouko

“Of course you can, it’s okay……”

Her fluster reached an irresistible level and Natalia ruffled the locks of her hair with both hands. A startled Kuro flapped his wings and paced right and left on her head.

“She really is a great partner, wolf. I'm sure even the legendary Silver Wolf would approve of this one,” Garte laughed gaily as he spoke with Shirou.

There was no way he knew who Shirou was. It was just a joke, a reference to a legend.
However, Natalia couldn't help but look at Shirou. His brows relaxed slightly and a smile appeared on his face.

“Yeah. I’m sure he would say he’s glad you're here. Thanks, …… Natalia.”

Natalia's heart leapt in her chest as she saw the gentle smile on his face, which was completely different from when he looked at humans. He is the Silver Wolf. He is a legendary savior who has supported the beastmen for a thousand years.

Such a great man thanked her. No, even without that title, Natalia was so happy that this hard man had honestly acknowledged her that she was completely lost for words to reply.

Her thoughts raced,

I want to be praised by him more. I want to be recognized by him more. I can help the beastmen that he can't. I can make up for what he lacks.

I can be his partner.

Maybe this is what I've been looking for…

As she chained her thoughts together, her heart thumping even more, Natalia just continued to stare at the gray wolf, standing alone and quiet amidst the beastmen's laughter.

第三話 ストレイギャング

BNA ZERO
CHAPTER3

Chapter 3 - Stray Gangster

The deck of the ship suddenly became noisy with the appearance of calling seabirds. A blackbird, perhaps in a rivalry with the white silhouettes overhead, spread its wings and chirped loudly, but this one bird was no match for the cheers of the people gathered on deck.

“I see the city!”

"America! It's New York!”

As the skyscrapers glistened in the sunlight, Natalia's feet froze in place, even though she had to get back to the cargo hold. The scene made her realize that everything she had seen so far was just old towns and cities. If her sense of distance was correct, she figured the silvery square buildings towering toward the heavens were so huge that one of them could easily house all the inhabitants of a beastman village by itself. They seemed to be stacked on top of each other, standing in a heap on the land. She had never seen nor heard of anything like this.

Natalia’s words came out with a sigh, "This is..... America.....”

While aiding beastmen who had been forced to flee their homes, they all had jumped on an immigrant ship to escape. It was less than one week later. If they had been traveling on foot, she would have been able to visually follow the changes in the landscape, but what awaited them across the sea was a different and futuristic world. Humans had already advanced to a point that beastmen cannot understand.

With a mixture of excitement and awe in her heart, Natalia took one last look at the skyscraper and quickly left.

"Alright all of you beastmen. Let's get out of here.”

At Shirou's signal, the beastmen emerged from the darkness of the cargo hold, and using their natural agility and keen senses, ducked under the scrutiny of the ship's crew and jumped into the sea one after another. This was opposed to the cheers of the passengers who proudly descended the ramps to the docks.

"Oh my God, it's cold.”

"Shhhh. Be quiet. We're swimming as far as we can around to the side of the harbor.”

The father and son of the capybara beastmen swam along, arguing with each other. There were three families for a total of ten people. None of the group, including Natalia, Shirou, and Kuro, had official tickets to be aboard the ship. They were all complete stowaways.

As soon as Shirou and Natalia realized that they were on an immigrant ship, they considered returning to land, but the three families, who had been forced to flee their homes twice in a short period of time, wanted to find a new place to live rather than return to their homeland, which had been ravaged both psychologically and materially by the war.

Shirou was not the kind of man to just abandon them. In the end, Natalia also decided to join them all in going to America.

Natalia was the first to make it to the corner of the dock and reach for the concrete platform. The platform was not built for unloading cargo, and was so high that it was difficult for her to reach. She simply felt ashamed of her small body. If she had been in her beast form, she could have been a little more athletic, but she was still in human form.

“Gotcha….”

Her hand, which was stretched out as far as it could go, was suddenly grabbed from above.

“What!?” exclaimed Natalia.

A human face peeked out from the platform and said, “Hold on, I’m going to lift you up.”

He was a well-tanned man with long frayed black hair. He was wearing what looked like work clothes.

“When you get up here, stay here and don’t move,” he sternly commanded.

The man then pulled the other beastmen up one by one. Natalia grew impatient. The man seemed to be some kind of port official. She was sure that he would report all of them to his peers for being stowaways. She quickly looked around, but there was no one else in sight besides the man. If they wanted to escape, they could have, but the boat ride and swimming had left the beastman families exhausted.

Natalia figured that the only way to get out of this place was to do something about him. It would most likely come down to Shirou doing something. However, if this blew up into a larger problem as soon as they had just arrived, the large group of them would be completely stuck and in trouble in a strange foreign land. Natalia felt helpless.

“Are you the last?” asked the man.

"Yes.” responded Shirou.

After watching Shirou crawl up on his own, the man looked around at Natalia and the others who were sitting down and said, “My people, welcome!”

“What?..” Natalia was surprised and stared at the man's face as he shouted his welcome.

“You’re a beastman?”

The black-haired man grinned and nodded as Shirou confirmed what he had known all along.

“I'm Vincent. I’m a black panther beastman.”

It was hard to tell from the smell of the tide and the sea, but Vincent definitely smelled like a beastman.

“It's not a good idea to let ourselves be seen. All of you come over here.”

They did as Vincent asked and moved to a small warehouse. There was a group of beastmen there who seemed to be his friends.

"Who? Vincent, who are these people?” One of them asked.

“They're beastmen. They were on the immigrant ship we saw earlier.”

The men looked at each other for a moment and then laughed.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, seriously? You're stowaways! You guys went all in!”

“That's quite a lot, about ten people? How did you do it with that many people?”

“Welcome to America, land of the free!”

They greeted them so affectionately that Natalia and the others could only stare blankly. Their groove was very different from any beastman she had ever seen.

"Fabio?”

“Yes, sir!” The youngest boy in the group, probably in his early teens, stretched out his back when Vincent called him.

“Go get some apple pie from the store. Get enough for everyone. These guys are pretty hungry.”

"Yes, sir!” After answering cheerfully, Fabio ran out of the warehouse.

When they heard the word "apple pie," a hint of anticipation appeared on the faces of the bewildered beastmen. As Vincent had guessed, they were all starving.

Maybe they're good people... thought Natalia until Shirou's voice sharply interrupted the relaxed atmosphere.

"What are you doing in a human port? Do you work here?"

Was it my imagination, or did the men's eyes seem to sharpen like knives for a moment? Natalia pondered.

Vincent responded proudly, "Yeah, I work here at the port. My main job is security."

He sat down on a nearby crate and held out his arms lightly in a gesture as if to indicate the entire harbor.

"Did you know that in the war, which apparently isn't completely over yet, New York was beaten to a pulp by an enemy submarine called a U-boat?"

"No." responded Shirou.

When Shirou simply shook his head, Vincent only smiled thinly as if to say, "Right?" and continued to talk without sounding so boisterous about events.

"Unlike Europe, this country never became a battlefield, so we were a bit careless. However, the submarines didn't mind crossing the sea, and in addition, more people than expected were coming to this country to escape the war, which made everyone over here nervous. There was no telling what kind of dangerous people might be mixed in with them. That's where we come in, we can use our good sense of smell."

"Wait a minute!" Natalia could not resist interrupting.

"What is it, crow girl?" asked Vincent.

"This country, do they recognize beastmen?"

In human society, beastmen are taboo. Although their existence is acknowledged to a limited extent in one town, region, or another, beastmen do not have an official position in any human society. Although they are human beings, they are treated similarly to stray cats or dogs that have taken up residence without permission.

However, does this country, the United States, a much newer country than those of Europe, officially recognize beastmen? Natalia pondered.

"Oh, uh. I don't know. I'm not sure if it's proper recognition, but....."
Vincent's answer was as vague as his expression. Nevertheless, the fact that the characteristics of beastmen were understood here and that he was entrusted with the job remained unchanged. A thin ray of light shone into Natalia's heart.

“Here you go, sir!” A cheerful voice came running from the edge of the warehouse. It was Fabio, carrying a paper bag in each hand.

"We made this apple pie in our store. It has a reputation for being delicious, so make sure you taste it!”

He handed out a slice of pie to each of the beastmen who were all looking like a bunch of wet rats.

Natalia also received a slice. It was still warm, and the aroma of apples and sugar tickled the back of her nose as the steam rose. She knew even before she ate it that this was going to be an excellent meal.

"The port security guards make this stuff too?” Shirou asked.

"Well, we have a wide range of talents.”

Vincent's eyes flickered for a moment, and like Natalia, Shirou didn't miss it. Without touching his apple pie, Shirou lightly swept his fingertips, pointing over towards the edge of the warehouse, and walked off in that direction. He wanted to have a private chat. Vincent chuckled faintly and followed him with a shrug of his shoulders. Natalia, along with Kuro, followed them as well without a second thought.

“You've got some serious eyes, you.” Vincent said suddenly, as soon as they reached the remote location.

“I'm not talking about your vision. This port is often frequented by deserters who fled from the battlefield, and they have these dry eyes that look like they've seen hell, but yours,..... are more than that. It's like you've got hell itself inside you. What and how much do you have to see to become a creature with eyes like that?”

“I don't want to talk about it. Who are you?”

He chuckled again at Shirou's unconvincing response, "It's counterproductive to keep secrets from a man like you, so I'll tell you right off the bat that we're what's commonly known as a gang.”

"A gang.....?” Natalia asked back.

"People think we're a criminal gang that deals in bootlegging, secret gambling, prostitution, loansharking, usury, etc., but we're actually a bunch of scoundrels who do some illegal things from time to time.” responded Vincent.

“So everything you just said was a lie.....?”

"No. No, it's all true. The Port of New York was originally controlled by gangs, and the federal government couldn't get their hands on it. However, it's also true that suspicious foreigners like spies come and go from here. That's why we've been asked by local families to take on the job of maintaining security."

"The bad guys keep the peace?" Shirou said in disgust.

"What's wrong with that? Even scoundrels need a quiet bed to sleep in." Vincent smiled back cynically, not even pretending to be offended.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Shirou.

"Let me ask you this, do you have any idea where you're going?"

Hey! Natalia glanced at the beastmen who were eating the apple pie with relish. She realized that she hadn't even taken a bite of her delicious looking pie, but she held it for now and attempted to answer the question.

"I don't think....."

"We can provide you with a safe place to sleep," Vincent said shortly, cutting her off.

"We're in charge of guarding this port and the edge of the city. We can house everyone there."

"Are you sure?" When she looked at him expectantly, Vincent turned his palm to her and said, "However," rebuffing Natalia's voice.

"This is not a charity project either. They will be paid rent, and as long as they live here, they will work. If they're strong, they can unload the cargo at the port. If they're not strong, they can work somewhere else. Fortunately, in this town, the restaurants get ridiculously busy at mealtime, so that's where weaker ones will be for the time being. If that doesn't work, I'll see if I can find them another job"

He rubbed his chin and looked at the beastmen families as if he were examining them.

"Yes,..... The girl over there is quite a good judge of character. I think she'd make a good waitress."

".....You really think she should be a waitress?" stared Natalia.

Vincent then broke her tense mood and poked the black beak of Kuro on her head mischievously.

“What’s the matter, little crow? Are you imagining the kid working in a dirty restaurant?”

"Hey, down here! I asked the question!”

When Kuro growled at him, Vincent grinned and withdrew his hand.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any fancy restaurants.” responded Vincent.

"Mmm.....”

Natalia grunted. If what he was saying was true, this opportunity would not only be a good thing, it would be a blessing in disguise for the beastmen families. After all, they had come to this country almost by force. This would replace the fear of the unknown with a feeling of hope. *They might be able to make it in this country,* she thought.

As Natalia thought this, a cold voice passed over her head, “You make it sound too good to be true.”

It was Shirou, the wrinkles between his eyebrows were as bold as ever. He's always had a strong sense of caution, but it's even more apparent when he's guarding beastmen.

“It’s not going to work.”

However, Vincent's demeanor did not falter either. He added to his words to show he had nothing to hide, “The apartments are too small to house all of them together. They won’t have the same freedom as when they were living alone with other beastmen. The wages are less than they are for humans, but they will still have to pay a portion of it to us. This is fixed and non-negotiable.”

Shirou was about to say something, but Vincent held up his index finger to stop him.

"However, if they use their beastman power to their advantage, they can do the physical labor of three humans. I'll teach them how to be in their beast forms without being seen, so they can have fun and live an easy life in the city. Not a bad deal for the beastmen, right? If they can find a better paying job, then they can go there. We're not going to stop them.”

"You're awfully good at taking care of people. Why?” asked Natalia, more out of pure curiosity than suspicion.

Most beastmen would really only try to protect their families, at most. Beastmen who help strangers, like Shirou, are extremely rare. Vincent's motives seemed to have a hint of trying to protect the lives of the beastmen. Natalia could see that he had his merits. For a self-proclaimed villain, he seemed to be relaxed. He gave a wry smile and looked at the beastman families and the gang members who were talking to them.

“The beastmen can get by on their own in the woods and meadows, right? It doesn’t work like that here. In a human city, we have to rely on each other to survive. We can help each other, use each other, or whatever you want to call it. Anyway, we beastmen can't survive unless we work together. That's why.”

"Wow ……!” Natalia was honestly impressed. This beastman, Vincent, was different from any other beastman she had ever met. He understood the rules of human society and was able to fit himself into them. Was he special, or was it the climate of this country that made him so? Natalia felt that this ideal would be a great help for the future of the beastmen as a whole, and she tried to ask Vincent more questions, before suddenly.

"Vincent!”

A voice called out from the doorway of the warehouse, causing everyone in the room to turn around at once.

"Jackson!?”

An intelligent looking man with blond hair pulled back in an all-black bun appeared. He was young, probably the same age as Vincent and the others, however...

"Hey……!”

Shirou grabbed Vincent by the shoulder as soon as he realized who he was. Natalia was also surprised to hear the hard sound of Shirou's accusing voice.

“This guy is a human.”

“Yeah?” Vincent said, nodding as if it were nothing.

“Jackson's family and ours are allies.”

When Shirou heard this, the deepest wrinkle between his eyes appeared.

"An alliance? You are in league with the humans?”

“This is a human city, remember? What's wrong with teaming up with humans?”

Vincent tilted his head in a slightly mocking manner. Natalia could only stare blankly as the two men exchanged sharp gazes of starkly different intensity just above her head. They should not be arguing. She knew that the two of them needed to talk more, but she couldn't find the words to stop the both of them, or rather, Shirou.

Moments later, Jackson’s tense voice interrupted the stand-off.

“Vincent, is this going to take long?”

“No, there’s no problem. Is it time for that job?” asked Vincent.

“Yes, it is. I need your help,” responded Jackson.

“Alright. I'll send out the instructions to my people and be right there.”

After a quick exchange of words, Vincent walked over to his companions and told them what was going on, despite Shirou's stern look. His friends nodded and got the beastman families up and moving. As Natalia watched the beastmen bowing their heads and thanking him for his help, Shirou's grave voice reached her ears as he spoke againto Vincent, "I need to see if I can trust you. This is non-negotiable.”

Outside the window, the scenery of the city flowed by, regardless to any movement of her own body. Unlike a wagon or a ship, the vehicle was driven by means that were completely incomprehensible to her, but she had always wondered about them.

“I've never been in a car before! ”Natalia said excitedly to no one in particular, sticking to the window.

“Oh that's interesting. What do you think?” Vincent asked, catching her voice.

“I feel like I'm in a house, it's so strange!” responded Natalia.

Vincent shook his head and laughed, as did Jackson.

If this little car is like a house, then Cadillacs and Rolls Royces are castles.” responded Vincent.

“But not as fast as I had hoped.”

“Well, that's a very beastman thing to say,” Jackson said and smiled as he gripped the steering wheel and glanced at Natalia in the backseat through the rearview mirror. "So, Vincent. Who are these two?

“They are saints from Europe who have been protecting the beastmen who came over. They want to check us out and see if we are trustworthy.”

Vincent, in the passenger seat, turned his head to the side and looked alternately at Shirou, who had his arms folded across his chest, and Natalia, who had not moved from the window.

“You can tell the crow girl anything so long as it’s appropriate for kids under the age of 18. You can tell the man anything you want, so long as it's not a lie.”

"Is that right?” responded Jackson to Vincent.

“Yes. If you try to trick or deceive him, he will smell you out. He's a wolf, and a very nosy one at that.”

"I didn't tell you what my animal nature was.” Shirou finally spoke.

“I know you didn’t. I don't work as a security guard at the port for nothing. You have the smell of an old wolf on you.”

The car carrying the four of them drove nimbly along the main street of the port district. The city was overflowing with people and goods, and Natalia was almost giddy at the complexity of the scene as they passed. It was as if she was walking through the guts of a giant creature.

“We're here.”

Jackson stopped the car at what appeared to be a restaurant. The sign hanging in front of the entrance read, "Preparing", but Vincent didn't care and pushed open the door.

"Hey, is the old man around?”

He said in a stifled and powerful voice, a change from his calm demeanor of before. A middle-aged man who appeared to be the owner of the store immediately came out from the back.

"Well, well, well, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Jackson.....”

"The usual. Do you understand?” When Vincent says this, the owner turns his head as if he is being accused of something and replies weakly, "Yes.....," before heading to the back of the store. When he reappeared, he had a small paper bag in his hand.

“It's for this month.”

Vincent took the slightly thick paper bag and immediately handed it to Jackson. Jackson looked at the contents and mumbled, "It's not enough.”

"W-what do you mean?”

Vincent growled, and the owner shrank back like a turtle. “Our waitress quit this month and the restaurant is not doing well..... I can't afford to pay the bouncer’s fee any more.”

Bouncer's fee, it's one of the things that Vincent confided in Natalia and Shirou earlier, that the gang manages. In other words, they're here to collect it. However, the relationship is not that of employer and employee, but is more based on threats.

“That’s for our services. We just kicked out an annoying customer who got drunk and got out of control for you the other day, didn't we?!”

In order to calm Vincent's anger, Jackson immediately added a soothing voice, “That's what you did last month and the month before that, Mr. Grayson. If you keep trying to get away with that kind of excuse, we'll start wondering if we're making a mistake. You might be underestimating us.....”

“No, that's not true.....”

“Then I’ll have you make up this shortfall properly. You know what you have to do, don't you?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Jackson looked at Vincent as if to ask, "Is that okay?”

“Damn, I guess.” Responded Vincent.

He scratched his head and suddenly relaxed. The two of them looked somewhat relieved, which made their interaction seem somewhat theatrical to Natalia.

I see. ....., thought Natalia.

The two of them seemed to be playing good-cop bad-cop. Vincent is the one who unilaterally crushes the other party's arguments, and Jackson is the one who makes his demands when the other party is frightened. Aside from Jackson, who was human, Vincent was a beastman. Natalia couldn't help but be amazed that he was capable of such social dexterity.

But still,..... She continued to think.

What were they going to make the shopkeeper do? Even if the exchange was theatrical, it didn't mean that their act was fake. Their tone of voice was filled with a sharpness that let her and Shirou know that they were indeed villains. Natalia could feel Shirou's gaze sharpening next to her. What were the demands of the gang? The two of them had to find out if they were really trustworthy or not.

“The usual place is the brown apartment on the corner of Sixth Avenue, fourth floor.”

What’s at that place? Thought Natalia.

“Eggs Benedict, French fries, and fried chicken for eight, right? I've just finished making them and they'll be delivered soon!” The owner's voice rang in Natalia's ears as she focused her nerves.

What? Thought Natalia bewildered.

"Hey, wait a minute. How is it already done?" Quipped Vincent.

"It's a wonder, Mr. Vincent!" Responded Jackson.

"Hey, old man! You're trying to play us! Pay up with money, c'mon!"

It was going to be just an order....? Thought Natalia in realization.

After the owner had fled to the back of the store at Vincent's angry voice, Natalia finally understood what was going on. When she looked to the side, she saw that Shirou had also bent his eyebrows in a strange way and was somewhat caught off guard.

They left the store and went back to the parking lot as a group.

"Now that's one of our jobs, collecting the bouncer's fee. The port attracts a lot of roughnecks. It doesn't matter if it's war or not, there's always a fight going on. Some of the businesses we protect try to cheat us by giving us things in kind like that instead of money,..... but we also use that restaurant a lot, so we don't want it to go under."

Vincent complained as they got into the car.

But wouldn't they be worse off with a sudden request of food for a large number of people? They have to have some idea of what people are going to buy, don't they?"

Natalia replied to his curious question without hesitation.

"I'm sure they probably stock up more in advance in anticipation of that. By ordering in bulk, they get a discount on the purchase price, don't they?

Vincent turned around with a surprised look on his face.

"You're just now realizing that?" Jackson chuckled as he grabbed the wheel.

"That bastard....." Vincent's mouth dropped into a grimace.

"It's only a small amount of change anyway. As long as you think you've done a good job in your gut, you should tolerate his antics. If Mr. Grayson gets carried away, then I'll have to give him a good lesson." His partner in the driver seat lightly admonished him, and the car started up again.

Natalia was beginning to think that these two men were very funny. Even though they prided themselves on being scoundrels, there was something about them that did not hide their good-naturedness. Jackson, for his part, never showed any irreverence or arrogance toward the beastmen. He treated them as equals, or as if there were no difference in race at all.

It was a completely new, yet somehow dazzling relationship. If it were to be them, they might be able to take care of the beastman families. Shirou glanced at them, but he kept his arms crossed and a frown on his face. As soon as they started moving again, Jackson suddenly stopped the car.

“Vincent, look at that.”

Natalia also looked in the direction he was pointing. It was another restaurant. She could see a large customer yelling something at the waitress in the glass-walled building.

“I haven’t seen him before. Shall we go?”

"Yeah.”

They got out of the car and Natalia and Shirou followed.

“I told you, there was hair in the soup I ordered!”

As soon as they opened the door, a voice blasted out of the restaurant, staggering Natalia and Kuro above her.

"That’s impossible! Look, it's red hair. We all have black hair. That's your hair!”

The second wave belonged to the female waitress. The volume of her voice was more intense than the first. It’s pressure almost pushed Natalia back out the door. When Natalia looked inside and saw a small fat back with an apron wrapped around it.

“What the hell is wrong with you, old lady? I'm a customer! Even if this is my hair, I don't like the way you've treated me! Call the manager!”

“Shut up, eat the rest of your food, pay up and get out of here, you idiot!”

“I'm not leaving! You're making me sick. Pay me my refund!”

"Sir.” Vincent's voice interrupted the exchange of foul language with a single supple feline gesture.

“Could you please be quiet? We all want our lunch hour to be pleasant and peaceful.”

“Oh, Vincent! Jackson, too! Nice timing!” The waitress lady cheered brightly, as if she had forgotten how angry she was not a second beforehand.

"This customer has made a hell of an accusation.”

“I can tell. We could hear your loud voices outside.”

Vincent turned to face the man. He must have been nearly two meters tall. He was not tanned like a longshoreman, but his thick arms, which could have been the torso of a child, were peeking out from the sleeves of his turned-up shirt. Vincent was big enough to be an adult, but compared to him, he looked two sizes too small.

“What the hell is wrong with you? If you have nothing to do with this, stay out of it.”

The man's voice sounded like he was swinging a machete, but Vincent didn't flinch, and he even smiled as he asked, “I haven't seen you around. Did you just get here recently?”

“So what if I did? I'm gonna have a field day in this town.”

“I see. That's what I thought. If you want to live here like us, it's time to learn.”

Right after he said that, Vincent turned into a black shadow and disappeared in front of the man.

“What?!”

As beastmen, the only people who could follow it with their eyes were Natalia and Shirou. Vincent winded his way through the aisle - the small gap between the seating area and the counter - and came up behind the man, twisting his arm in an instant. Natalia saw it. She saw the black animal hair slowly receding from the collar of Vincent's shirt.

She gasped as she realized what it meant, *He turned into his beast form in an instant, and then immediately turned back into his human form.....!*

Natalia didn't know of any beastmen who could go through a transformation and back in such a short time.

“A-Aaahh...!?”

The man's arm was twisted and he fell to his knees in agony. Vincent was holding the arm of a man twice his size with a cool expression across his face. Since he was no longer in his beast form, his arm strength was probably the same as a human. Despite this, the man was still unable to resist due to the precise twisting of his joints. Natalia could not help but be surprised by this. Beastman fights are inherently simpler and more ferocious. They use simple and dumb methods such as punching, kicking, and stomping. However, Vincent's method was much smarter than that.

“We're the ones in charge around here. I've memorized..... your face, but your figure is obvious from a distance..... Next time you do something stupid, I’ll twist more than just one arm, understood?”

He leaned forward and exhaled onto the back of the man's neck, his breath reeking with the raw smell of a fierce animal just before it bites into its prey. The man turned pale and nodded several times. As soon as Vincent released his arm, he fled, nearly ripping the door off the hinges of the store before he had time to say a word.

"Well done! Thanks for the help, Vincent!" The sales clerk took Vincent's hand and praised him.

“Hey, come on. This is our territory. We're not going to let some stranger make a big show of it.”

“I'll put some boiled eggs on your next bouncer's bill!”

“No no ....., just give me the money.....” responded Vincent.

Natalia couldn't help but let out an exhale of admiration when she saw Vincent exchanging a wry smile with Jackson. He was in complete control of his violent and ferocious nature as a beastman. He also knows how to use it to blend in well with human society and how to avoid using it when he needs to. She had never met anyone like him before.

"I am surprised that there are beastmen who only use their powers minimally. It was as if you were really protecting the security of the city.”

As the car started up again, Natalia gave Vincent her honest opinion. He rubbed the bridge of his nose saying, “Well, if I got into trouble every time there was an altercation and didn’t use my powers minimally, the people would run away and I wouldn't be able to get the bouncer's fee. Everything is for business.”

"Business?” Natalia furrowed her brow when she heard that word. It was a word that seemed to be at the top of the list of words that didn't belong to beastmen.

“The times, they are a-changin'," replied Jackson in the driver's seat in a somewhat grandiose manner. “There is a man who has called for the establishment of an underworld order centered on doing business, saying that it is a great loss when gangs beat each other up. His name is Lucky Salvatore. His ideas have spread widely, and violence is becoming the gangs’ last resort. We're on board with that.”

“Well, in the end, it's power that counts.” Vincent pounded his fist into the palm of his hand.

“The bigger the city, the less graceful it can be. There will always be shady areas. The only people who can control these areas are the shady people who can control the violence. Even if the police or the government tries to suppress them, the people living in the shadows will scatter and gather again. They can't control the people living behind the scenes, the bad guys are in charge. That's the best way.”

Before long, Natalia found herself nodding repeatedly as she listened intently to the conversation that was somehow turning into a confirmation of ideals. Vincent might indeed be one of the group of so-called scoundrels, she was not sure if she wanted to follow his example, however, she could say a couple of good things about him. Vincent was not only the first beastman of his type that Natalia had ever met, he was also more reasonable than any other beastman she had ever met.

The next day, the beastmen who had come as illegal immigrants began to work. The fact that they were relatively mild-mannered beastmen helped, and they obeyed Vincent and his team's instructions and began to do more and more things. After a few days, it was not unusual to see bovine beastmen, their faces hidden by hats and masks, carrying large loads with ease behind Vincent and his men, who kept an eye out at the pier for any suspicious cargo or people. They seemed to have taken to the job quickly. At noon, they all would gather at the usual warehouse and have lunch together. Occasionally, family members who worked at restaurants or cleaning companies would come and join everyone for lunch. The elaborate cuisine of the humans was a new experience for the beastmen, who had only eaten simple food in the past. The meat and bread sandwiches, drenched in chemical seasonings, were obviously unhealthy, but the taste was strangely addictive. All of the faces that had been dark and depressed back home in Europe showed no concern or dissatisfaction with the life they were now leading here.

Maybe we don't need to stay here anymore, Natalia thought. *In this corner of the port town, the beastmen would be able to live happily together.*

And yet, Shirou was reluctant to leave. He watched over the beastmen from morning to night, and accompanied Vincent and Jackson on almost all of their work, and even when he was sure that their actions were not harmful to the beastmen, he still did not stop looking at them with suspicion.

Natalia wondered if Shirou had smelled something. Whenever she asked him, his answer was always just one sentence: "Humans cannot be trusted.”

Natalia began to worry that his attitude would cause tension between Vincent and the others. No matter how calm Jackson was, he would be insulted if Shirou continued to harbor such suspicion. She wondered if there was any way she could convince him.....

As Natalia soothed her exhausted mind with the unfamiliar music on the radio, she turned her head to the sound of two footsteps and conversation approaching from the back of the warehouse.

"Hey, little crow girl.”

Vincent held up one hand, and Jackson smiled at her.

“The crow is Kuro, and I'm Natalia.” When Natalia corrected him, the black panther apologized lightly and looked around as if searching for someone.”

"Where's Ogami?”

“He went to check on the people at the restaurant.”

“Good work. It's nice to know that there's someone who can keep an eye on the beastmen.” Natalia was a little relieved. Vincent did not seem to be annoyed by Shirou's behavior.

"What are you listening to?” Jackson asked, referring to the music on the radio.

“I don't know. Fabio said it was called country music. It makes me feel relaxed.” Responded Natalia.

“You seem to be interested in human culture. Do you like music?”

"Y-yes, I do!” Natalia nodded, feeling the words catch in her throat. She couldn't give a straightforward affirmation, but she tilted her head in an unnatural way.

“If you want, I'd be happy to take you to a place where you can listen to some real jazz. I know a group that survived the heyday of big bands in the thirties. Their music was like lullabies for me. I'm looking for more fans.” Responded Jackson.

She was baffled by his enthusiasm. It was not an invitation that she could easily follow.

"Don't do that. You can't take a kid like her to a place full of delinquents like that. Ogami will beat the shit out of you.” Vincent laughed, but when he retracted his smile, he suddenly looked around and asked in a lowered voice, "Hey, Natalia. Who the hell is that Ogami?”

"What?”

Natalia stared back at Vincent's face, he had a very serious expression.

“I said before that it’s like he's got hell inside him, but that's all of it. If there is such a thing as hellfire, it’s the glow in his eyes is it. It's like a fire that won't go out and continues to burn inside his body forever....., I can feel that kind of bad vibe coming off of him.”

“Hmmm....., that's a bit vague, isn't it?” Jackson called out to him, in a serious manner.

“Yeah. Sometimes I don't know what's going on either. Ogami looks both young and very old. He's a strange guy, really.....” Vincent sighed tiredly.

“I've been trying to figure him out, just like he's been trying to figure us out. I'm confident in my eyes.”

“I'm sure of the black panther's eyes as well,” Jackson nodded in agreement.

“I noticed it when I was watching Ogami that he might be..... empty.” Continued Vincent.

"Empty .....?” Natalia was shivering in surprise. Vincent must have taken this as anger, because he hurriedly lifted his hand in a small, soothing motion.

“I'm not calling him some kind of flimsy, empty-headed bastard. I think there's a hell of a lot of substance to him, but I don't think it's his true nature at all. So, Natalia...?”

“Yes, sir?” She realized that she was nervous for some reason when he called her name.

“What kind of a guy is Ogami? What's he doing here in the United States, helping these beastmen? It’s not that it’s a big deal or anything, it’s okay, but what does he like? What does he hate? I just want to make sure there's a person in Ogami, even if it's just a small one. Otherwise, I'm starting to think he's some kind of monster.”

“Dislikes....., probably humans.”

When she looked at Jackson apologetically, he nodded with a wry smile and said, "I know exactly what you mean.”

How could these shrewd gang members not notice? Natalia thought.

“Likes....., imitating a sheep dog....?”

"What did you just say .....?” Vincent froze, then suddenly opened his mouth wide and started laughing.

“I see. I don't know about that one, he likes that kind of stuff? Don't take it personally, I'm just relieved. That's the kind of answer I was hoping to hear, I guess.”

Just then, a beastman came through the doorway of the warehouse. ”Mr. Vincent, Mr. Jackson, what are you doing? We're all waiting for you.”

"Oh, yeah, I'm just here to get some tools.” Vincent responds to the beastman.

“We've been talking for a while. I'll see you at the break, Natalia.”

“Yeah..... Good luck with your work.....”

After seeing them off, Natalia was alone, pressing her palm hard against her still restless chest to silence it. Before she knew it, cold sweat was running down her back, leaving Vincent’s jovial laughter in her ears.

I don't know...

Impatience and anxiety made Natalia scream the words in her chest.

I don't know anything else about Mr. Ogami.....!

He is the Silver Wolf, a special being who has lived for a thousand years. Somehow she decided that was just who he was, but of course, there had to be more to him than that. She could understand why Vincent felt relieved earlier, he saw a person in him.

Natalia, who had been watching Shirou for a while now, naturally felt the same way. Her thoughts began to flow.

He is not a god, he is a person, but I don't even know if he is really a beastman. Is there such a thing as a beastman who can live for a thousand years? How could he live that long? Where was he born? Where is his family? Why... Why is he on a journey to save beastmen? For him, eternity is real, but it is empty....

The sound of that word, “empty,” grated on her ears.

There was a reason why Vincent's words had left such an eerie echo in the air. It was just the other day. Natalia and Shirou were watching a cramped, but happy, family of beastmen in the apartment they had been given from the rooftop of a building across the street.

“They seem to be okay now.” Natalia spoke

"Yeah.....” responded Shirou.

When she turned towards the direction of the not-so-happy voice, Shirou was only giving them a dull look.

"Don't you like the fact that they live in a human city?” He followed up.

Natalia was silent, but he was half right.

If one were to look behind them, they could see the ocean. Other than that, the human city stretched out in every direction. It seems more unrealistic to try and find a mountain or forest where they could live. Even in a place like this, what more could Natalia ask for as a person who has been protecting these people, for them to be able to spend their lives without their families being torn apart?

What makes a beastman happy? She thought.

“What does happiness mean to you, Mr. Ogami?” She asked him half-jokingly.

"Happiness?……”

He looked at her, as if he hadn't ever thought about the subject, and his expression was as sad as a lost child, which put Natalia at a loss for words.

Then he answered, “I don't know what it was. I forgot all about that a long time ago.”

His voice stuck in her ears. The Savior. The Silver Wolf. The master of a thousand-year legend.

What is Shirou Ogami?

The next day, Natalia began to worry about where to put the doubts that had grown in her mind. The girls were gathering at the warehouse for lunch as usual. Jackson came running into the room with a pep in his step.

Vincent, you guys are going to be happy. That dream's about to come true!

Really, Jackson!?

“Yeah!”

The gang stood up at once, and Fabio, the youngest of them all, was so excited that he took Natalia's hand and started dancing with her. Even the sight of Kuro flying away from them in the commotion was like a white pigeon being released during a ceremony.

"What's going on?” Shirou, remaining as cold as a mammoth dipped in ice, asks Vincent with a dubious look on his face.

“Oh, we've been recognized for our work, and we're going to be added to the family under the umbrella of Salvatore, the big gang boss in this city.”

"Salvatore?” Natalia asked back.

Fabio, still dancing, answered, “He is the leader of the five families that rule this city. He's the guy who brought the gangs together after they had been fighting each other in a bunch of bloody battles. He's an amazing guy.”

Natalia recalled Jackson mentioning something like that to her once. He is the man who transformed the gangs of this city into a well-organized, but violent group.

Jackson coughed and everyone's attention turned back to him. “My family was the one who was recognized, but I'm going to recommend Vincent and the others the next time we meet. After all, we are two families in one.”

"Come on, Jackson. It's our dream to make a name for ourselves in this city," Vincent and Jackson clapped their hands together lightly, and then clasped them tightly.

Even the immigrant beastmen, who had no idea how human society worked, were beaming as if something good had just happened. Even after Jackson left, saying he had some business to attend to, the excitement of the beastman gang continued.

"It's been a few years since we drifted into this city..... The fruits of your labor are finally paying off, Vincent!"

"Maybe one day I'll have a subordinate as a member of the Vincent family. And then I'll be in charge of a city like this one, where I can-.....!" Fabio, in particular, had not returned from his daydream and was unaware that a large moth had closed in on his face.

However, there was one man who blew away all that enthusiasm with a single sentence.

"Humans will always betray beastmen." It was Shirou.

Even as the four gangsters glared at him, Shirou's gaze was somber, as he looked back at them with an oppressive weight in his eyes.

"It's best not to trust them too much."

"What the hell, you don't know shit!"

Vincent admonished one exasperated gangster with a look that said, "Stop it."

His gruff voice echoed in the freezing air of the warehouse, "Ogami, I understand what you're saying. Humans and beastmen have never been able to understand each other."

"We never will."

"But it's okay. We and Jackson have the same values. Do you understand?" Vincent told the mute Shirou.

"Power." He clenched his fist in front of Shirou. Slowly the fist started changing color, turning into the color of a black panther.

Vincent, now an unmistakable black panther beastman, looks at the old wolf with his strong, thoughtful, emerald green eyes. "We gangsters respect and admire the powerful. The power and speed of a beastman, the cleverness of a human, both are necessary in this city. It doesn't matter where you come from or where you grew up, as long as you have a little civility and never betray us. We're all the same, and we're not the only one who thinks so."

Unperturbed by Vincent's spirit, which made even his friends gasp, Shirou responded coldly.

“You can't trust a single human.”

“Maybe not in your past, but in our present, we can,” retorted Vincent.

Suddenly, a whistle sounded, indicating that a ship had arrived at the port. The beastman workers scurried out to the loading dock, taking advantage of the opportunity to escape the tense conversation. Fabio and the others also rushed out, looking back at Vincent over and over again.

“We've been stragglers from the start. There's no place for us in the beastman world now, so we'll make a name for ourselves in this human city.” With those last words, Vincent returned to his human form and walked away from Shirou.

"Kaa....” Kuro made a small sound as if at a loss, but Shirou kept his back to him and Natalia and did not speak.

From Natalia's point of view, the unity between Vincent and Jackson seemed unshakable. To her, it seemed to be a model of bridging distances, shared values, and a way for humans and beastmen to really get along.

Is Shirou just saying this because he hates humans? A man who hates humans and helps beastmen - an empty man who has nothing else to offer. Such a sinister image weighed heavily on Natalia's heart.

It was two days later that the unfortunate news arrived. From the moment Jackson, accompanied by a gangster named Jeff, appeared in the warehouse with a pale face, even the most unsuspecting beastmen could predict that the news wasn’t going to be good.

In front of Vincent and the others, who were bewildered and silent, Jackson spoke out in a dark, timid voice and said, "I was told to cut you off..... all of the beastmen.....”

In front of an appalled Natalia and the others, he told them with trembling lips what had happened.

Lucky Salvator, the face of the Five Families, was imprisoned in the Great Meadow Prison. At the time of his arrest, he was placed in the impregnable Dannemora Prison, where no one has ever escaped, but it is said that, through his power, he had himself transferred to a more comfortable facility in handcuffs.

Jackson was shocked and speechless as they approached the darkened passageway to a rather brightly lit jail cell. His cell was so opulent that Jackson thought that it was as if a hotel room embedded in it. He had a sofa, a bed, a radio, and even a refrigerator. It was literally a different world from the one with the rats right next door.

"Boss, I've brought the young man from the Panther’s Mouth.”

“Thank you for your hard work.”

He sat down on the sofa, his back to the man who had brought Jackson here, and replied as curtly as if he had ordered room service. A man in an expensive suit, relaxing in a hotel at the back of the prison, that was Salvatore.

“I'm sorry to have called you all the way here. Well, have a drink.” Offered Salvatore.

He took a bottle of liquor from the shelf next to the refrigerator and served it to Jackson through a gap in the iron grate. His face was close to Jackson’s. He had an old scar on his face from a gang fight in his past, and his right eyelid was drooping. He looked just like the rumors said he would.

As Jackson slurped down the glass he received, the heat of the richest Scotch whisky he had ever tasted filled his throat and the back of his stomach.

“I've heard rumors about the Panther's mouth. I am sincerely pleased to have a talented young man like you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jackson managed to reply, almost choking on the smell of scotch vapors.

The "Panther’s Mouth" was the nickname of the port that Jackson deliberately spread behind the scenes. It was said that if anyone suspicious or untrustworthy tried to pass through, they would be ambushed by a panther. In the early days of his partnership with Vincent, it had been a bluff to add to their credibility, but now it had become something that people were talking about.

“I've always felt bad about leaving that plot of land to you guys, with no back-up whatsoever.”

“No, no way. We think we were given a unique opportunity.”

Although it is now known as the Panther's Mouth, until a few years ago Jackson and his friends had been nothing more than a small group of sharp-eyed delinquents who had taken up residence in that neighborhood. The New York gangs’ territories are divided into five parts by the five major families, but at that time, that small port was an independent area that did not belong to any of them. It was treated as a buffer zone between two huge families that were in conflict.

Inside that region, prior to Jackson’s and Vincent’s arrival, several families had engaged in what became a spiraling conflict. Depressed by the bloodshed, Salvatore was about to send an agent to end it, but the day before he could, the port’s family at the time was wiped out in a horrific killing spree. The five families were not happy to see a power vacuum, but it was obvious that if one of the families absorbed the territory, it would cause more friction

between all of them. That's when the Jackson's group, a gangster group in name only at the time, came into the picture.

“To be honest, I thought it would be worth it if we could buy some time to adjust our interests, but you guys have done a great job. The Panther's Mouth is now a prime piece of property that even the other gangsters recognize.”

Jackson felt his heart race as the smiling king of the underworld said this. Immediately, the satisfaction of knowing that his eyes and his instincts had been right sprung up inside him. Immediately after being entrusted with that territory, Jackson and his team had been overwhelmingly lacking in strength to compete with the rough-and-tumble dockworkers.
No matter how much they used their wits, they had no choice but to back down in the face of raised fists.

That's when they met them, the beastmen, who had smuggled themselves into the country. The moment Jackson’s eyes met theirs, he knew these were the guys. Thanks to Vincent and the others, there was no one left who could resist them by force. At the same time, the security of the port improved dramatically. Before, only small ramshackle ships would come to the port, but now passenger ships, immigrant ships, and ships carrying important cargo use the Panther's Mouth for its safety and as a cover for their secret merchandise.

“That was the long introduction, let's get down to business. As you've probably already heard, I'd like to invite your family to work for me. You'll be able to run a bigger operation and make more money. There's nothing to lose on your end, after all, I've already made all the necessary arrangements. In other words, this is purely a thank you from me.”

There was no reason for Jackson to refuse. However, standing on the verge of his head nodding with a smile gushing from the inside of his body, Jackson made a proposal that he made sure not to forget.

“I've got some guys I'd like you to take care of with us.”

"Oh, yeah?”

“A guy named Vincent and his friends. Thanks to these guys, we-....”

“Beastmen, right?”

The sudden drop in the temperature of Salvatore's voice confused Jackson, but he nodded, "Umm, yes.....”

The next words thrown at him caught him completely off-guard.

“Jackson. Cut them off.”

It was bad news...

“What!?” Jackson’s eyes bugged out.

"Get rid of the beastmen. That's the condition for joining me.”

“W-....What for!? They're .....!”

“I can't accept the beastmen. Cut them off.”

“.....Oh, no...Oh no! Vincent and the others are useful guys.....!” Spitting out the words with a groan, Jackson slumped.

It was thanks to Vincent and the others that he was able to grow to this level. It is because of them that he has been able to overwhelm people with power and demonstrate his abilities as a thinker. If he loses them, he will lose it all.....

As Jackson's thoughts swirled, Salvatore's voice fell upon him, “From now on, I'll lend you people. You won't have to rely on them anymore. I'm buying your smarts.”

"Why.....?”

Jackson clenched his fists and continued to Salvatore, “You've risen to your current position by making friends from all walks of life and races. You respected the good guys, put business first, and controlled violence. Even an idiot can see that this is rational. Why change that now?”

Salvatore's eyebrows twitched slightly, pulling on his old scar and a very grim expression appeared on his face, probably subconsciously. He exhaled a sigh of sorrow and said, “This guy Vincent,..... he's letting all the beastmen who come to the harbor live in the city without permission, right?”

“Yes,..... but they haven't caused any problems. On the contrary, they work very hard for a low salary. We can use them, the beastmen, they have strength and stamina.....”

“That's it.”

“What?”

“If they join forces against you, will you be able to fight them?”

Jackson was at a loss for words. It wasn't that he hadn't thought about it. When he first started working with Vincent, he had been wary, “But with Vincent, you can ..... he’ll do whatever you ask. He is a man I can trust. He will never betray me."

The reply came back with a deep sigh. “I'll tell you one more time. Get rid of the beastman. If you can't do that, then this conversation ends here.”

"Mr. Salvatore! He would never betray me, but you want me to betray..... him?”

“I’ve told you what I wanted to tell you. Hey, give him a ride home.”

In a swift move that did not allow for further conversation, the guide interrupted Jackson. Jackson looked over his shoulder and saw that Salvatore was no longer looking at him. No voice could reach him anymore. The only thing that could be given to Salvatore as an answer now, was action. Jackson, confronted with this realization, had no choice but to leave quietly.

“What the hell is that .....?” It was the youngest, Fabio, who was the first to voice his emotions and slam him.

“He can't accept us because we're beastmen!”

Natalia's chest tightened as she felt his anger through the air, as he had accepted the hope of this opportunity more honestly and happily than anyone else.

It's happening again. This will happen again. Beastmen and humans. The same result again. Naturally, she searched Shirou with her eyes. He crossed his arms tightly, his face grim as ever, and said nothing.

After glancing at his indignant companion, Vincent turned to face a nodding Jackson.

"So, what are you going to say?”

“Kick that shit to the curb!” Vincent's companion growled from beside him, but Jackson tried to keep his voice low.

“I'll see him again, somehow, and talk to him again. I'm sure he'll understand. If he’s that kind of person,.....”

“.....What are your friends saying?” responded Vincent.

Jackson made eye contact with Jeff and nodded, “I've talked to Dominic and Peter. I'm sure they understand. No one's going to cut you guys loose just to make themselves look good, but this is a big opportunity. If we miss it, we'll never be this lucky again. We have to make it work... somehow! But.....”

"Isn't that funny about this Lucky guy?” Everyone in the room reacted to Natalia's voice, who had spoken up suddenly without any introduction. “As much as I hate to admit it’s because he's a bad person, you guys are as rational about things as anyone I've ever met. If there is a risk of betrayal or rebellion, the other families are no different. In fact, humans are more

dangerous because of their grudges. There are far fewer beastmen than humans in the first place, why should he be so wary of them?”

"That's what I don't understand.” Jackson buried his face in his hands.

“Maybe Mr. Salvatore doesn't know much about beastmen? Maybe he's afraid of them because he doesn't know them.”

“Natalia, there's no way that man doesn't know. He's in jail and is able to get information from all over New York. But..... yes. I've never heard of him having any problems with beastmen in the past. This should have been a way of getting rid of those emotional conflicts and proceeding with things rationally in the first place. There is something wrong with this.....”

“If he's being contradictory, there must be a reason for it.” Natalia looked at Jackson and Vincent, “If we can use that as a springboard, maybe he'll listen to you.”

Jackson looked up and there was an intelligent glint in his eye as he realized something.

Fabio, who was completely sulking, pouted his lips and followed up, “But what, for example, is that reason?”

“The simplest possibility is that they were instructed to do so by someone much higher up.....” Natalia responded, and the boy looked dumbfounded.

"Heck, he's the boss of bosses. No one is higher than that.” retorted Fabio.

"No, not really.” Jackson countered.

“Salvatore is trying to make a deal with the federal government for amnesty. There are even stories that he has even helped the military in their operations. If the government orders him to eliminate the beastmen, he will have no choice but to comply.”

"What then? If we storm the prison and break him out, won’t the problem be solved?”

Jackson responded immediately to Vincent’s words, "It's not that simple. He wants to be free legally. If he escapes, he'll be hounded by the police for the rest of his life. There's no point in that. We're small-time crooks, we can't make deals with politicians. If we could do that, Lucky would have done it himself.....”

While the gangsters were arguing, Natalia muttered to herself. “Isn't it possible that he's trapped in something much bigger than.....?

They all looked at her suspiciously, "Bigger than the country?” Jackson's voice nudged her to explain.

“I have seen many conflicts between beasts and humans. Sure, there are problems between the two of our groups, but..... individually, humans and beastmen can understand each other. Just like you guys, but when the scale of the problem grows, it's as if someone is blocking us from being together. Like this.”

"Oh, come on, are you talking about fate or destiny?” Vincent looked up at the ceiling, half-amused.

“No, I think it's something more artificial.....”

“That sounds like a conspiracy theory.” Jackson said, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Someone who controls the world of humans and beastmen behind the scenes? Unfortunately, we're the ones on this side of the world, and I've never even heard of such a being.”

'I guess you’re right..... That was out of place. Forget it.” When Natalia withdrew her ambiguous statement, only a grim silence remained in the room.

The conversation was at a complete standstill. As Jackson had said, the only way was to meet again and try to convince him somehow. It was at that moment that everyone began to look at each other weakly, hoping that someone would come to a haphazard solution.

Suddenly, there was a series of roaring engine noises, and then they came to a stop near the warehouse with the high-pitched screech of brakes.

"What the hell?” Jackson got up and went to the back door with a quizzical look on his face.

Just as the stagnant air began to move and everyone in the room looked at each other with some relief, Jackson's dismayed voice echoed from the back door.

"Dominic, Peter? What the hell are you-”

The rest of his words were cut short by a constant popping sound. Jackson's lithe body twitched as if he were dancing. His beloved white shirt quickly turned red, splattered and torn to scraps. At the end of the sound, he collapsed to both knees and then to the ground like a puppet with cut strings, falling to his side without motioning to catch himself, and didn't move a muscle after that.

"Jackson!?”

Jeff was about to rush over to him, but stopped short when a man emerged from behind the doorway. His shout echoed out, "Dominic! What have you done to Jackson? You betrayed him!”

Dominic’s reply to Jeff was the muzzle of a short machine gun pointed at him.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!!”

As Jeff tried to run back to the group, he tripped over his own feet and fell into a heap in front of Natalia. The light and the sound of gunfire filled the dimly lit corner of the warehouse, and Jeff's back burst open with the clothes he was wearing. It was as if a school of fish were jumping up and down on his back.

A few moments later, everyone was horrified to see a red liquid spreading slowly across the warehouse floor from underneath his prone body. Jeff was dead, his eyes widened in horror.

"Hide!” Shirou shouted, and at the same time, all the beastmen present rushed behind one large container. A series of popping noises filled the warehouse as Natalia followed them. Fabio, who was the furthest away, missed his escape, tripped, and fell just in front of the container. The gunfire was moving towards him, making the warehouse floor explode.

“Aaaah!” screamed Fabio

“Don't die here!” Leaning forward, Shirou grabbed Fabio and pulled him into the back behind the container.

“You're dead, you animals!”

Just as she thought the storm of bullets had stopped, Natalia heard a high-pitched man's voice.

“Damn you, Dominic! What the hell is this!? Peter too!?” Vincent, who had his back pressed against the container next to Natalia, shouted angrily.

"Damn, you're alive, you stubborn bastard!”

“You killed Jackson and Jeff! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

The voice that came back was trembling with frustration and annoyance. ”Shut the fuck up! It's your fault Jackson didn't get rid of you all as soon as he could! What are we going to do if this whole deal goes south because of you? I don't give a shit about an alliance with a beastman!”

“What are you gonna do without Jackson!?”

“Shut up! As long as I get new territory and new men, I don't care!”

The shouting was interspersed with the sound of footsteps slowly approaching. Natalia looked around with strained eyes. “We have to save everyone somehow. ……! There's got to be a way to ……!”

Think. Think. Think. Think. ……!

Natalia couldn't think. Whenever she tried to think of something, Jeff's and Jackson’s dead bodies flashed into her mind. She had just been talking to them, she was overwhelmed.

They understood the beastmen. They had tried to understand us, and yet, they were killed regardless. No, is that why? Why is this happening? No matter what beastmen do, the humans always bring about this end. What is wrong with them? Is it the beastmen’s fault? What's wrong with humans? The humans. Humans. Even humans are…….

He grabbed her by the arm and Natalia gasped.

“We’re going to get out of here, and we're going to force our way out. Do you understand?” It was Shirou.
He asked everyone else the same question with his eyes, and all the beastman gang members nodded.

"Whoa!”

Shirou kicked the large container, sending it gliding across the floor of the warehouse, and sending sparks flying like a wave as it collided with the men.

"Beast up and run! Disperse!”

Following his instructions, Vincent and the others transformed into their beast forms at once and ran outside through the wide loading door.

“Come on!”

Natalia and Kuro were carried by Shirou as they escaped the warehouse.

“Don't let the beastmen escape, especially that black panther bastard!”

Dominic and Peter’s scratchy voices continued to linger in Natalia’s ears.

Why is this happening to us? She thought.

As Shirou jumped from one building to the next, Natalia looked blankly at the scenery of the city that was moving past at breakneck speed. Here was a dream they shared. They had values they could understand, and yet, in the end, this is what happens. This is what happens. It's as if someone really is standing in the way. Someone much bigger than a country.

Is it a god? She thought.

“You were right.” A shadow running alongside Shirou told him in a dark voice. It was Vincent, the beastman now turned into a black panther.

“Jackson was a trustworthy man, but I forgot one thing, humans are greedy. Much more so than us beastmen.....” His voice carried a sense of desolation, but it was different from a deep sadness.

This is the philosophy of the beastmen, and it is based on their view of life and death. Humans fear death and run away from it. Beastmen fear death and dodge it. For the beastmen, death is something that is very close to their hearts. It's always there, and if you can't avoid it, it's over. There's a certain grace to it. They’re there, and they’re gone.

Natalia wonders if he will ever be sad about Jackson's death.

"That scar is from when you saved Fabio, isn't it?”

Hearing Vincent's words, Natalia noticed for the first time that Shirou's hand was covered with blood.

“It's just a scratch. It's nothing serious.”

“But you protected my comrades, that's for sure. You have my thanks.”

“What do we do now?” Shirou asked, instead of replying.

“I don't know. All I know for sure is that we can't stay in this city anymore.”

Vincent's green eyes looked off into the distance. It was as if he was looking at the remnants of a dream that was flying away at a much faster speed than he was running.

“Where is your crew?”

"They all ran off in different directions. We haven't decided on a meeting place or anything. If they're still alive, maybe we'll see them again. They'll be hiding out for a while.....”

"What about the beastmen in the harbor?”

Natalia's voice interrupted the conversation between the two men. The thought seemed to bother Shirou as well, and he gave Vincent a look.

Vincent chuckled a little, “We probably don't need to worry about them. The police usually don't do their job properly when dealing with beastmen, but when gangs and ports are involved, it's a different story. They'll jump at the chance to reduce the power of the bad guys.”

"That's good.” Natalia said, a little relieved.

“You guys really like to help beastmen, don't you?”

Vincent took another look at Shirou's bloodstains, and the edges of his tense face relaxed slightly.

“Of course,” responded Shirou.

He then asked Vincent, "Are you coming with us?”

The black-haired beastman moved his head slightly to look back, pondered for a moment, and then announced, “..... No, no, no. Go to the weaker ones. I'm going to be on my own for now. Farwell.”

Vincent turned ninety degrees and disappeared into the city. The black shadow soon disappeared from sight, buried in the myriad of colorful city lights. He never once looked back at the port that held so many faces and so many memories. This is why the lives of beastmen are so sad.

"Where are we going, Mr. Ogami?” Natalia asked, regaining her composure.

“I don't know, but we're going west, away from the ocean. Once we're away from the harbor, they won't be able to get at us as easily.”

"Right.”

Suddenly, there was a whoosh of wind. Natalia twisted around to look behind her.

“What!?”

There was a huge chunk of metal coming at them that she had never seen before.

“Mr. Ogami!”

“What the hell is that!?” Shirou’s eyes also bugged out.

It was an object that looked like a large machine used for loading and unloading cargo at the port, reassembled into a human-like shape. In the center of the frame was a human, holding a control stick and shouting angrily at them.

"Wait for me, you animals! I'll kill you with my machine right now!”

It was their pursuers. The arm of the machine lifted up and made a popping sound with a little smoke. A small gust of wind slipped past Natalia, invisibly quick, as a bullet missed her.

"Curl up!”

Holding the shrinking Natalia tighter than ever, Shirou increased his speed.

“It's useless! This is a power suit designed for use in war against beastmen! You'll never get away, you dog!”

Natalia knew from conversions she overheard among the scientists at the beastman camp that the war had produced a number of weapons of various types for use against beastmen. It was said that these weapons were all equipped with a strong impact force to suppress the rushing power of beastmen.

"Excellent.” said the pilot.

Natalia's vision descended at once as Shirou jumped into the valley of the buildings. As soon as the wind pressure from the landing blew away the stale smell, he kicked the ground and ran through the alleyway. Natalia managed to see behind her with her unstable vision. Despite its large size, the power suit was right behind them.

“Ha ha ha! Run, run, run! I've killed dozens of beastmen with this thing!”

Natalia could now feel a different kind of strength in Shirou's arms as they were wrapped around her body.

"A little self-control.” Shirou said to himself.

As he slowed down, he threw Natalia into a large metal trash can and slammed the lid down mercilessly in the process.

"You've finally given up! Now I'm going to turn you into a beehive, you barbarian!”

Natalia lifted the lid slightly and stared desperately at the scene outside. The power suit was firing wildly at Shirou, who was jumping around. The deafening sound of gunfire overtook the sound of the brick apartment walls popping and shattering as bullets struck them and shrapnel fell to the ground.

"Damn it, this guy, he's all over the place!” The iron lump chases after Shirou, who moves three-dimensionally around the narrow space of the back alley, using a leaping power that belies his huge size. The wall that he had used as a foothold was shattered and the railing of

the stairs that he had grabbed was bent, but the line of fire from the gun did not overlap with Shirou's movements.

“What’s going on ……!? This is a weapon designed to move as fast as a cheetah-like beastman! Why can't I catch you!?” The man controlling the machine shouted in a hoarse voice.

A cold voice came back from Shirou, who had become gray belt-like afterimage in the back alley.

"Your eyes.”

"Eyes?”

Shirou's words were spoken to the pilot as he kicked the wall and bounced sinuously through the space between buildings.

“Beastmen who live in the world of high speed, like cheetahs and falcons, have eyes that are strong enough not to be swayed by that speed. However, your eyes are still just human. You can't track your prey with them.”

“Don't kid yourself! How about this!”

The arm of the machine pointed at Shirou, from it, countless arrows shot out in unison. With no place to flee, the numerous arrowheads spread out like a torrential downpour, closing in on him. Shirou couldn't avoid them.

He plunged straight into the storm of arrows, twisting his body with the grace of a fish, and passed through it unharmed. He had slipped through the gaps between all the arrows.

"The gaps are bigger if you shoot from that far away.”

After zigzagging through the air, Shirou's shadow finally landed on the top of the power suit, right above the pilot. His hand, wrapped in animal fur, gripped the suit’s frame so tightly that it made a crunching sound. The wolf's eyes glowed darkly.

"Remember, human. Running on the grasslands is not the same as living on the grasslands.”

"Wait, wait, wait!“

The man's scream stopped Shirou's fist a millimeter in front of his face.

“I've never really killed a beastman before, I just maintained these things in the army! I'm just trying to save my life……!

“Oh.”

Shirou nodded and fired his fist again from that position, stopping it at exactly zero millimeters, and punched the man in the face. The seat that was holding his body in place was stretched to its limit, and the man hit the back of his head on the metal frame, knocking him completely unconscious.

“I could tell by the way you smell.”

The power suit didn't move any more after that.

"Mr. Ogami!”

Natalia crawled out of the trash can to greet the victorious Shirou. Even against such a mechanical monster, he was not afraid at all, nor did he lag behind. He was never empty. He was, after everything, a very strong and brave beastman.

"Wait, Natalia!”

It was only after she had already let her entire body out that Shirou's sharp voice rang out in restraint.

“Go fuck yourselves! You bastards!”

A voice filled with hatred reached Natalia's ears as if she were being beaten. She turned around to see a gangster holding a machine gun to his waist. Time froze, not even a second before her death, an arm reached out from the side and pushed her away.

"Ahhhh!”

The sound of gunpowder bursting and a spray of blood landed on Natalia. Shirou had pushed her away. So he was shot instead.

"AAAAAAAAGGHHH!!!”

Shirou, covered in blood, threw a nearby drum with all of his strength as he yelled at the top of his lungs.

“Oh, my God!” The drum collided with the gunman, and with a broken scream, he was blown in a backward direction and stopped moving. Shirou saw this and fell on his back as well.

“Mr. Ogami! Mr. Ogami! Aaaaaaah!” Natalia screamed as she clung to Shirou.

His gray hair and clothes were covered in blood, and she had no idea where he had been shot. Tears spilled incessantly down her face.

"For my sake,..... You have to protect me.....!”

The god. The silver god is going to die! She thought.

“I'm fine.....!” Shirou groaned, blood bubbles sticking to the edges of his mouth, as he tried to sit up.

“No! .....! No, please! You can't be okay! Don't move, please!” Natalia desperately tried to hold Shirou's body down.

“Just back away a little,.....! Gaaaahhhh!”

Natalia screamed again as a stream of blood spurted from Shirou's body all at once. There was a metallic ping, and something hit the toe-tip of Natalia's shoe. It was a bloody bullet with a cracked tip that appeared in her tear-stained vision.

"Whew.....!” Shirou exhaled heavily.

The blood stopped spurting out like a geyser, and the gunshot wounds that were in plain view began to fill up.

“What!?” Exclaimed Natalia.

Shirou smiled bitterly as he plopped his hand on Natalia's sobbing head, “My body is special, you know. I’m not getting buried any time soon.”

"Mr. Ogami..... Mr. Ogami.....! W-why save something like me?.....”

Unable to find the words to say anything else, Shirou gently grabbed Natalia's shoulder as if he were soothing a child. “You're an upstanding beastman. You were thinking about saving the other beastmen right up until the end. Don't call yourself a ‘something.’ If you say that, I'll become a ‘something’ too.”

"I'm sorry..... I’m so sorry.....” As she continued to be tossed about by her mixed emotions of fear and sadness, Shirou patted Natalia on the head with an exasperated pat and then gently placed Kuro on top of her.

“That said, it's time to get out of here. Give me your shoulder. Even if I’m immortal, it still hurts when I get shot.” To Natalia, the man saying this now was a kind and gentle beastman unlike any other.

Natalia smiled, wiping her still flowing tears. If there was a god in this world, he would not be so cruel as to not let humans and beasts get along, he would be like the god Natalia knew, scarred and lonely, but full of kindness.

“Why are you so willing to help the beastmen ……?” She lends him her shoulder and they stand up, sharing the weight of his large body as she asks him the question.

"Do we need a reason to help our people?”

“A person without a reason can't be this strong.”

Rubbing her eyes hard, Natalia looked at him. He looked a little surprised at her immediate retort, but then chuckled quietly, biting his lips slightly.

“I'm not sure why……. I'm sure it's just a small thing.”

His voice sank quietly into Natalia's chest. She was sure Shirou had been hurt and suffered many times while saving beastmen like this. He had always been the one to help, and how many others had lent him a shoulder like this?

In the legend of the Silver Wolf, there are no partners. He was always alone. The lonely look on his face at that time, when he mentioned he had forgotten what happiness looked like, came back to her mind.

Natalia felt that this time, she wanted to help Shirou.

第四話 まっさらな獣

BNA ZERO
CHAPTER4

Chapter 4 - Brand New

The reddish brown earth stretched out endlessly. The dry wind carried nothing but dust and a few scraps of grass mixed in. Natalia and Shirou were collapsed together in the middle of the wilderness.

“……Why is this happening to us?.....”

“I don't know..... I'm sorry.....”

Shirou's words were dry as he replied to Natalia's faint moan.

“I'm not, Mr. Ogami……” Natalia said bitterly before going quiet.

They had left New York and went west, just west. They had no set plan in continuing their journey, the silver wolf’s journey, to help beastmen. They jumped aboard departing trains, and secretly shared rides on the back of trucks. As they repeated this cycle over and over, the glittering urban scenery slowly became less and less spectacular, until they reached a place where even the green of the trees had been stripped away. It looked like the end of the world.

This brought them to now.

The only clue that they were still on Earth was a simple road made of cleared stones that stretched to the edge of the shimmering horizon. Neither of them were even sure which way was the right way to go anymore.

Additionally, Natalia was having a hard time regulating her body temperature. She could cope with cold weather by wearing heavy clothes, but not with hot weather at all. If she doesn’t at least drink water to cool herself down, she will quickly become dehydrated.

As soon as she opened her eyes, which had been closed in order to protect what little water she had in her, she saw the image of the man who had fallen with her.

But... Well... I guess I won’t have to die alone...

She was shaken by the unexpectedness of her own thoughts.

Whether or not it was her beastman characteristic resignation to death, she could no longer think about it as she was suddenly struck with sleepiness.

Sometime later, she began to stir, feeling her body sway slightly in small up and down motions.

It was as if there was a soft blanket underneath her. The gentle rocking was so comfortable that Natalia wondered if she had died and been reborn as a baby somewhere else. She imagined that she was in a cradle where she didn't have to worry about anything anymore.

“W-What...!?”

The moment Natalia recognized the reddish-brown earth and murky, dusty sky as it reflected in her unfocused eyes, her eyelids fluttered wide open in panic.

I’m not dead, and this is not a blanket. This is-

"Oh, you're awake,” A clump of fur the color of the wilderness spoke.

As she became more and more conscious, she realized what it was.

"A bear beastman.....?”

"Ah. How do you do, my exotic sister? My name is Gregono. As you can see, my animal nature is a grizzly bear.”

Natalia was being carried on Gregono's shoulders, a grizzly bear beastman with an eye patch over one eye.

“Kaah,” squealed Kuro anxiously as he jumped on top of Natalia’s head, where he usually sits. She began to jerk around to try to get him to let her down.

“Just get some rest,” commanded Shirou, who was walking beside Gregono on his own two feet, “He saved us from being stranded.”

“Good thing I was just passing by. Even a buffalo would be charred black in half a day from sleeping on that frying pan.”

“Thank you, sir....”

She felt she had no choice but to say thank you, but then a strange feeling of unease came over her.

“You were just passing through? In the middle of nowhere?” The questions just spilled from her mouth.

Gregono laughed loudly in a manner that suited his huge size, “There's a cluster of medical herbs up that way and I come through here once a month from town to get them.”

Natalia noticed the small bag on his back and asked, "Town……?" Natalia looked around. There were no roads in sight, not even the slightest hint of civilization, just huge rocky mountains growing like mushrooms in the wilderness.

“We're almost there.”

Believing him, she allowed herself to be carried on his shoulders for more than ten minutes. As they walked into the rough rock formations, she saw something unexpected. It was definitely a road, surrounded on both sides by stone bricks. The paved road wove its way through the gaps between the large rocks, leading them to something even more unbelievable. There were dwellings hollowed out of walls of rock. Not just one or two, but many. There were windows and stairs carved into every towering rock face surrounding a central square.

"This is the town……!?”

“How can it be……!?” Surprisingly, it was Shirou who shouted in amazement, even more than Natalia. Suddenly, he ran to the center of the square and looked around at the circular landscape of the town of carved grottoes with a look of dismay.

“It's impossible. This town is…… This place is……!”

“What's wrong, brother?” Gregono asked, looking a little surprised.

Natalia would never forget the look on Shirou's face as he looked back at them. The silver wolf's face looked like he was about to burst into tears.

"This is my home, Nirvasyl.”

Wakhan Taluka was the name of the town. Natalia sat on a stone bench carved out of the rock wall and squinted at the peaceful scene. A large number of children were playing in the square. A dewy-eyed merchant was selling finely woven goods, and the women in front of him were engrossed in worldly conversation. Another man stood in front of a rock-walled store, wondering whether to enter or not. The store smelled like something was baking.

“Citron.” said Natalia to no one in particular as she smelled the air.

Suddenly, a little boy who had been playing with everyone, sneezed loudly and turned into a sheep.

No one was surprised to see him transform and the kids teased him, “What, you still can’t control your beast form? You’re such a kid!”

A bipedal gorilla and an orangutan were carrying a large piece of stone. Although some were careful not to block their path, no one rolled their eyes at the sight of them. This was a place where only beastmen lived.

As Natalia's eyes followed the children running out of the square, her gaze naturally fell on the profile of the man sitting quietly next to her. Shirou.

He had the same dull look in his eyes as usual, but his mouth, which was usually tightly closed, had a softness to it that could almost be mistaken for a smile. The wrinkles between his eyebrows had also loosened up considerably.

Natalia pondered, ...*Nirvasyl. That's what he said when he saw this town yesterday. He said it was his home.*

"Do they look that much alike?" When she asked him, his face, which had been gazing at the square as if he had forgotten she was there, turned to Natalia more calmly than ever.

"Oh. It's just like it. Smaller in scale, but the town and the people are just alike....."

The slight cheerfulness in his voice made Natalia very curious. A savior known to all beastmen. He is the silver god who rescues beastmen in distress. Of course he has to have a beginning, a home where he was born and raised. Natalia wanted to know, and she wanted to go there.

"Where is Nirvasyl?" She asked, but did not expect the answer she received.

"It's nowhere to be found."

"What?"

"The humans destroyed it."

Natalia was at a loss for words, seeing this, Shirou continued to speak.

She was sure it wasn't for anyone else to hear. It was as if a memory was spilling out of him as he looked upon a place so similar to his home.

"A long time ago, near the deserts in the east of Europe, there was a city called Nirvasyl. There was a man there named Abyad. His name meant 'white.' He was a young man, an ordinary wolf beastman like any other."

It was the sad story of the origin of the Silver Wolf.

The days were hotter and drier than ever. The town's watchtower had seen several sandstorms this month. Nirvasyl was a city built inside a mountain valley, so it was unlikely to be affected by sandstorms, also known as burning winds. For Abyad, however, it was a matter of life and death. He was going to have to pass through the storms to get back to the human city.

“It's so fucking hot……”

He groaned as he forced himself to fan his face with the excess of the scarf he had wrapped around his head.

“Are you okay?”

The camel that he was riding was fully loaded with business goods, but didn't even whine or squeal in response to his question as they walked leisurely down the street crowded with beastmen. The heat was drying everything out, and he could see the frustration on everyone's face.

Abyad rubbed his arm under his furred chin and mumbled, "I'd feel a little better if I were naked and in human form……" He laughed at the shallow thought.

On a day like this, if he were in human form and had to morph into his stronger wolf-beast form, the transformation itself could put his life in danger. That's also why everyone was quenching their thirst in their beast forms.

When they had crossed the desert and arrived at the human city the first time, he had decided to buy as much water as he could before coming back.

"Hey, Abyad!”

A small figure rushed up from the crowds that filled the main street on either side.

"Hello, Naki.”

Abyad raised one hand in greeting the figure, a sheep-beast boy.

“Abyad, I heard you're going to the human city?”

“Ah, yes I am.”

“Here you go. Here's some water. Take it with you.”

Abyad turned his eyes toward the leather bag Naki offered him, "Are you sure? The whole town is running out of water.”

“Yeah. Everyone's on edge, because the reservoir is about to dry up,..... or maybe it's frustration.”

Abyad's expression became grim as he remembered the scenery he had seen on his way through town. The bottom of the mortar-lined reservoir at the back of the town was now almost visible. Around the pond, there were disputes over the order and amount of water to be drawn, and the residents were becoming more and more stressed every day.

“It's crazy how little rain we've had this year.” Pondered Abyad.

“Yes. That's why you should take it with you, and take this, too.”

After handing over a leather bag filled with water, Naki took out a piece of important looking fabric.

Abyad looked through the window of a rock-hewn house in the direction they were walking. He could see sheep, llamas, and alpacas weaving with their own wool. One of them noticed Abyad and Naki and lightly waved at them. It was Naki's mother. Abyad returned the greeting and slid his hand over fabric Naki was holding.

“It's as good as ever, I see. I'll sell it to the humans for a good price.”

“You're so good at pretending to be a human, Abyad.”

“If they know you're a beastman, they'll give you a lot of trouble.”

“Do you have any tips for me?” Responded Naki excitedly.

“Not really. Just don't turn into a beast and keep quiet.”

“Hahaha, there are a lot of people who can't do that.” Naki coughed a little as he laughed.

"Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, just a little tingling in my throat.”

Abyad tried to cheer up Naki, who looked a little gloomy, “All right, I'll buy you a souvenir to thank you for the water. What would you like?”

Sure enough, the boy's face lit up, "I want a sheep doll!”

"A sheep doll for a sheep beastman?”

"Human-made dolls are finely crafted, you know. I like them because they are beautiful.”

Looking at the fabrics that were handed to him, the beastmen's goods were not inferior in quality, but when it came to toys and entertainment, the humans were far superior. The beastmen’s efforts were sometimes misdirected.

“Alright. I'll be back in about three months, so look forward to it.”

"Yeah!”

After parting ways with Naki with a wave of his hand, Abyad headed down the road through the gap between the rocks that hid the city.

Three months later, after successfully completing his business in the human city, Abyad's camel was loaded with goods that were not available in Nirvasyl. In his hands, he held the sheep doll that Naki had asked him to get for him.

He found the sheep doll, after walking around the human city searching for something that would not disappoint Naki. It was decorated with beads and colored strings. Abyad had to skip a few meals because of the unexpectedly high price of the doll, but he was sure Naki would be happy to see the prince-like sheep. As he thought about it, it wasn't an expensive purchase at all.

“I'll give it to him first.”

As Abyad approached the rocky mountain at the entrance to Nirvasyl, he imagined the smile on Naki's face and felt a smile appear on his own face.

"Huh……?”

He smelled a strange odor in the sandy wind.

"Blood…….!?”

As soon as he mumbled this, Abyad's vision caught sight of a figure running out from between rocks.

"Naki ……!”

His idyllic expectation that he would be greeted by the boy instantly vanished when he saw the fear in his face. There were two large shadows behind him. They were men on horses. Not only were they carrying bows and spears, but they were also wearing matching armor.

"……W-what the hell ……!?”

Naki dodged the flying arrows twice, but the third shot through his leg sending him falling to the sand.

Abyad could do nothing but stare as the man with the spear charged. The spear impaled deep into Naki's small back, spreading black spots on the reddish brown ground.

"N-Nakiiiiiii!”

Abyad screamed as he rolled off his camel and transformed his body into his wolf-beast form as he ran.

“You bastards! What the hell are you doing!?”

“It's another one!” shouted one of the men.

“Get him! Kill him!”

Without even a hint of fear, the humans turned their weapons and hostility towards Abyad. The sound of the wind whistled past his ears, but the arrows didn't hit him as he zigzagged, and thrust themselves into the ground

"Whoa!”

Just as he was closing in on the archer, a spear came out from the side. It was the archer's partner. Abyad kept his head low to avoid the spear and ran right under the handle to bite into the human's throat. Feeling the crunch of his teeth digging into the muscles and blood vessels, he turned his body with all the momentum he could muster and threw the human with all of his kinetic energy. The human was killed instantly by the blow, and flew away like a ragdoll into the sand.

"Huh!”

While the archer screamed at the sight of his partner's cruel death, Abyad would not allow him to get off another shot, and in an instant, he was upon him. Abyad slashed his throat with his sharp claws and killed him as well.

"Naki, Naki, stay with me!”

After finishing off the humans, Abyad picked up the fallen Naki.

"Ugh.....”

He closed his eyes and groaned in pain.

"Hang on. We'll get you to the city soon! It's okay, you're going to be okay! You're a strong little beastman!”

Naki's eyes opened, and for a moment, it seemed to Abyad that this was a sign that things were about to get better, but...

"OogaaAAAHH!”

“What!?”

With a terrifying roar, he was pushed down with such force that his mind went blank.

Naki’s bloodshot eyes made Abyad think the boy was losing his mind.

"No, Naki! It's me!”

Abyad shouted as he managed to hold Naki's body back as he tried to bite him, but suddenly, the strength gushing out from Naki’s small body disappeared.

"Naki. Thank God, you've calmed down.” Abyad was relieved and said looking into his face.

Naki’s eyelids were half closed as his colorless eyes stared back at him. They were lifeless.

Naki was gone.

"Hey, Heey ……!? Naki, NAKI……!”

Even though he called out to him and shook him, Naki did not respond nor lift a single finger. He was dead, his face filled with sorrow.

"Damn it, why……!?”

Abyad hugged his body tightly and cried out.

Why did this happen? Why did the humans kill Naki? I don't understand.

He gently laid Naki's body on the ground and held the sheep doll to his chest.

“Hang on... I'll be right back.....” The fetid smell of blood continued to waft from the entrance of Nirvasyl.

I have to get there. I have to find out what was going on.

The closer he got to the entrance, the more the smell of bloody rust in the air became horrifyingly thick. Before he knew it, his teeth were chattering and each step he took became

harder and harder to take. After passing through the gap between the rocks, he found himself in hell. The whole place was a sea of blood, and the corpses of beastmen were lying everywhere. A horrified gasp escaped from Abyad's throat.

"U-Ugh.....” Abyad heard a muffled voice and turned around. It was a monkey beastman leaning against a wall, deeply wounded but still alive.

“Stay with me, What happened?”

The moment he rushed over to him and took his hand-

"Gwaaaaah!”

“Aaaaah!” The half-dead ape-beastman attacked Abyad, baring its fangs as if it were trying to wring the life out of him.

As he dodged, the ape-beast plunged head first into the ground and never moved again.

“Goddamn it.....! Goddamn it! What the hell, what the hell is this.....!?” Tears of anger welled up in his eyes and trickled down to his clenched fangs.

He heard a scream from deep within the city. There was still someone alive.

Abyad started to run as his chest felt like it was going to burst.

At the end of the road, he saw his people being massacred. Their limbs were being chopped up, and when they could no longer escape, they were stabbed to death with spears without mercy. Large male beastmen, thin female beastmen, the elderly, and children, none were spared.

"Stop it!!!!” Abyad ran through the streets, slashing at the humans as they continued their atrocities.

"What the.....hell!?”

"Look out, there's something here--ggh!”

Some of them noticed and took up arms, but all of them were reduced to mute wrecks and collapsed after Abyad ran past them. At the far end of the road, clad in blood, there was a man wearing a distinctive suit of armor.

That must be the general who is commanding the soldiers. That's him. He's the one who did this to Nirvasyl. That's him!

Abyad caught sight of the man's face in his blood red vision, and gave a bloody roar.

“What have you done, humans!? What have you done to my home!? AaaaaaaAAAAAHHHH!!”

Unlike the fearful people around him, the general picked up a large javelin that was hanging from a nearby horse and quietly took a stance.

“Come.”

Abyad heard him murmur the taunt, which brought his anger to a boiling point.

It was supposed to be an easy fight. Abyad was going to bite and rip his throat out in an instant, just like he had done to the other humans, until the tip of the spear came right at him, with unusual speed and accuracy.

“What!?”

He could hear a metallic chattering sound that made his whole body tremble, as sparks fired off in his brain. In a fraction of a second, Abyad had stopped the spear from reaching his throat with his fangs and was gripping the tip with his teeth.

The general swung his arm around with unbelievable strength, and Abyad was thrown. He adjusted his posture in midair, placing his foot on a wall of a building as he landed, and then kicked with all his might, leaping at the general again. The spear grazed the tip of his nose.

“Ugh!”

One after another, streaks of silver light launched after Abyad as he avoided the general’s attacks.

“What the...!? What the hell is this human....!?”

The general had a terrifying and formidable skill that Abyad had never encountered before. He was slowly being cornered, and realized that the edge of the mortar-lined reservoir was right behind him. The water in the reservoir had completely dried up.

There has been no rain for the past three months. The beastmen must have been suffering from thirst and distress. All the while, Naki must have been enduring it, looking forward to his gift. That was what had happened, and this was the end.

How can I accept this? I can never accept this! Never!

"AaaaaAAAAHHHHH!”

Abyad leapt with all his might, but suddenly stopped in midair with a sound of ripping flesh as the general's lance pierced the middle of his torso.

“I won't forgive you....! I will never forgive you!!”

Tears of blood streamed down Abyad’s cheeks as he cried and struggled to close in on the general, the spear sinking deeper into his body.

The general's eyebrows twitched slightly at the sight of Abyad’s demonic spirit. He exhaled a small, sharp breath and threw the spear in his hand down into the reservoir with Abyad on it. Just as he was reaching out at the face of his enemy, Abyad was launched backward. The tip of the spear struck the bottom of the reservoir with such force that Abyad’s vision exploded into white.

Unsure if he was alive or dead, Abyad saw the bodies of many beastmen being thrown in around him. There were those who were already dead, some had been killed at the edge of the reservoir and had fallen in, and some were faintly alive and had died right next to him. He saw everything. The blood that flowed from the corpses engulfed his body. He could hear his own submerged body churning, his whole body boiling in the blood of his people. Anger, hatred, and despair were burning his body and mind without ceasing.

The pain, it hurts. I’m so sorry. I'm so sad. I just want to die.... He wished with his burning heart.

However, he did not die. He didn't know how or why he survived. Sometime later, he looked back at the reservoir he had just crawled out of, filled with the bodies and blood of the beastmen, and let out a howl that pierced the sky.

There was only one thing to do.

Kill him. I'm going to kill that man. I'm going to kill that general.

The stench of blood continued out of the city as a long thin trail. There was no way he was letting them get away with what they had done.

Abyad pursued them like the Grim Reaper, and before he realized it, his body was kicking the ground on all fours. His fur was shining silver, and the wind was scraping off the dried blood that had stuck to it. With each stride, his limbs gained strength and his body became as light as the wind. It was as if the people who perished at Nirvasyl were giving him strength.

Avenge them. Kill the murders....Yes, I will.

The sandstorm, that he had feared so much, was now squarely in his face. Running day and night, he reached the enemy fort, where a flag with a cross painted on it was flickering in the wind. As soon as he arrived, he killed every single person he saw. It was a one-sided fight.

The general, however, was not there.

“Where is the general? He's the one who blew a hole in my stomach, ” Abyad asked the person he had pinned down with his paw.

With tears and snot running down his face, the man replied in a barely audible voice, "He's not here. He went back to the capital."

"I see.”

Abyad then killed the man by biting his throat.

He had to follow the smell further.

The capital. I'll kill him, along with the rest of the city. I'll remind him of what he's done to the beastmen.....

"You demon.....!”

A trembling voice came from behind him, and Abyad turned around. A human child, no more than ten years old, held a knife as small as a twig in both of his trembling hands and pointed it at him.

“There's still one more alive.....”

"Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to us.....?!” The boy shouted in a sorrowful voice.

Suddenly, at that moment, the look of fear on his face and his tears overlapped with Naki's in Abyad’s eyes.

“What.....!?”

Abyad looked around as if he had just awoken. An old man and woman were lying in a pool of blood, along with the soldiers. There was no smell of beastmen blood. Clearly, they had nothing to do with Nirvasyl's massacre.

..But I killed them. I killed them without mercy. I killed them out of anger. I killed them all with of the same hatred and evil. Just like at Nirvasyl. Exactly like those brutal humans who attacked my home.

"N-no.....AaaaaaaaaaAAAAAH!!!”

“I've given up on revenge. I didn’t want to be like those humans. I wanted to think that I was

different from those who senselessly slaughter those who can't fight or are weak. I then went around helping the beastmen. I didn't want them to suffer the same way I did. I wanted to reduce the tragedies.... and maybe... I just wanted to prove to myself that I was a better creature than those humans....”

He smiled dryly, and Natalia thought she smelled a dense odor of blood that shouldn't have been there.

“But no. I've committed another senseless slaughter. You saw it, right? In the camp where I saved you. In the end, I am still the same brutal creature as those humans. I can't use the Silver Wolf's power anymore. If I use it, I'll do the same thing all over again. A thousand years of my life were..... wasted.”

That's why he was crying in that camp, Natalia thought.

“Your thousand years were not in vain.”

Natalia held her chest as she felt the pain of the emotions that were rapidly building up inside her.

“You have saved and supported many beastmen. You are truly the savior of beastmen.”

Shirou's face twisted in sadness. It was like he was trying to smile but couldn’t.

“But you are not saved,..... Not yet..... This is not salvation,.....”

Natalia thought to herself.

The man who was revered by the beastmen as their savior had suffered so much hurt and pain. Whenever he sees beastmen being mistreated or humans mistreating them, he must remember his homeland and it revives his anger, hatred, and despair. So many times he has forgotten what happiness was. Over and over again. Who else knows about this? Who is there to care for him?

“I've rambled on too long. I'm sorry. Forget it.....” Shirou mumbled, staring at the square with a glare.

No one knows the real Shirou. Natalia felt that she was the only one who could help this exhausted savior.

The next day, Shirou was still sitting on the bench, watching the town. His expression was calmer than ever. In the house they were given as a temporary lodging, there was a dreamcatcher; a strange ornament that could ward away nightmares. Perhaps it had done its job.

There were other strange things in the town as well. For example, there were narrow poles carved with the faces of humans and animals. These beastmen live in a mysterious culture.
Nothing had changed since the previous day. The town had a peaceful routine that has probably repeated itself for decades or centuries. Nirvasyl, Abyad's home, must have been the same.

Come to think of it, when did Abyad start calling himself Shirou Ogami? That name sounds like it is from Japan, that distant island nation. Perhaps there was something to it that made him choose and continue to carry that name.

Shirou didn't talk about it, and Natalia didn't want to pry in asking.

It suddenly occurred to Natalia that he might have been looking for a home all along. Now that they had found a town, which was very similar to Nirvasyl, she thought that he might stay here. The edge of the world could be the end of the Silver Wolf's journey. No one would ever visit such a remote place. The peace and tranquility of Wakhan Taluka will continue for a long time to come. It is a paradise for beastmen, separated from the war-torn world and its inhabitants. Here, he could rest himself. He wouldn't have to relive his painful memories. If Shirou wants to settle here, he can.

I think... I'll stay here with him... Natalia thought further.

She was the only one who knew about his heartbreak. She wanted to be there to support him so he could live in peace. Remembering what she saw back home in Europe, she wanted to forget everything. To Natalia, this did not seem like a bad future.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of a car engine in the distance, and a murmur spread through the square. The beastmens' eyes turned toward one direction. Natalia followed their gazes and looked at the entrance to the town.

A large crowd of humans were trickling into Wakhan Taluka. Shirou was about to get up from the bench when he was interrupted by people shouting, "Will!"

"Welcome, Will!"

"I'm glad you're here! Let's make a trade!"

"Will, where's the necklace you promised? Oh, is that it? Wow, it's amazing!"

A group of beastmen crowded around a human woman dressed in a sky-blue ethnic outfit. The woman had her black hair tied back and her eyes were dignified. Judging from the atmosphere and the way she looked, she seemed to represent the humans.

The beastmen were talking to the other humans in a friendly manner, and all of them had unyielding smiles on their faces. As Natalia and Shirou stood, unsure of what was going on, a voice called out, "Will, are you here?”

"Gregono, it's good to see you again.”

"Yes, me too, Will. Thank the heavens and the spirits.”

The woman called Will and Gregono held hands in an intimate way and were happy to see each other. The group of humans, led by her, quickly dispersed throughout the town. The packages they had brought with them were spread out in the square, and the trading going on for them was more lively than usual.

“What the hell is this.....!?”

Shirou's voice shook Natalia's body, as he was deeply upset by what he saw. The scene that had been his home until a moment ago was suddenly invaded by humans. For him, it was nothing less than a replay of his nightmare.

As his eyes raced around the square, he saw something that nailed him to his core. A beastman child and a human child were playing happily. The beastman was a sheep beastman and in his hand was a sheep doll decorated with beads.

Something inside him snapped.

“Get out! Humans do not belong here! They will betray the beastmen. I've seen it all my life!”

There was no time for Natalia to stop him. Shirou, who had unconsciously transformed into his wolf form, and was yelling and shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Mr. Ogami!”

Natalia rushed over to him, but the square, which had been filled with smiles and laughter, fell silent, and the two were met with confused and surprised stares from all directions.

"This is, I mean...” As Natalia spun in circles trying to explain Shirou’s actions, a woman stepped in front of her.

It was the woman called Will. She looked at Shirou with a resolute gaze and said in a calm but firm voice, “We have lived with the beastmen for a long time. Brother wolf, we are not your enemies.”

“Yes, calm down, Ogami. Let's talk. Right here. Take a seat.” Gregono said as he walked up after Will, and immediately pointed to his feet.

"Mr. Ogami," Natalia touched his arm soothingly, and he sat down on the ground with his wolf fangs clenched.

Gregono and Will waved their hands around as if nothing was wrong, and the square regained its original liveliness.

I'm sorry to have startled you, Ogami. This is Will, of the Niyor tribe. Will, this is Ogami, a traveling beastman, and Natalia.

"Nice to meet you," said Will.

"Nice to meet you, too," responded Natalia.

Will and Natalia were the only ones who exchanged greetings, while Shirou only lifted his lips slightly and flashed his fangs to show his displeasure.

"The Niyor are an ancient tribe on this continent, and they have been in contact with the beastmen here since long before the white brothers came across the sea."

Will added on to Gregono's explanation. "In my tribe, we have a close relationship with the beastmen, respecting them as the link between man and animal, and between man and spirit. We have a history of working together to fight against invaders. There is no way we would betray the beastmen. It would be akin to betraying our family."

"You respect the beastmen .....?" Natalia asked in disbelief.

Will nodded and smiled a little mischievously. "Yes. At the same time, they also respect us. I personally admire beastmen who can take the form of animals and use their powers. When I was a little girl, I believed that one day I could become a bear like Gregono."

The smile on her face was surprisingly childlike, and made Will's dignified appearance look very adorable, Natalia thought. Gregono, who was laughing beside her, seemed to be somewhat embarrassed. Natalia felt like she understood their relationship a little more.

"I know that the beastmen are in a difficult position in other lands." Will said, her expression and voice changing.

I also know that what Ogami said is happening. However, that is not the entirety of the relationship between humans and beastmen. Besides, our tribe has also been treated harshly by our white brothers. I understand their suffering.

With each word she spoke, Natalia could feel Will's pride in preserving history and her strong gratitude for being protected by it. It was not a short-term alliance like the gangsters in New York had, but a solid relationship of trust that had been maintained for generations. The

invisible wall separating beastmen and humans that she felt in New York did not exist here. She thought that it was just her imagination at the time, but....

“By the way, you guys came across the ocean, didn't you?” asked Will.

“Yes, we did.” Natalia responded positively to the sound of Will's voice, which had changed from an explanatory tone to a curious one. Strangely enough, she wanted to talk to them about more things.

“Is it true that there is a legend of a silver wolf over there that saves beastmen in distress?”

She barely stopped herself from turning to look at Shirou, but sensing something strange in Will's tone, Natalia asked in return, "Don't you have the legend here?”

“The legend of the silver wolf is said to have come from the beastmen who crossed the sea. Originally, the legend did not exist in our folklore,” responded Gregono.

Will followed Gregono’s words with her own thoughts, “Perhaps it was a legend spread by the beastmen living in a difficult environment to serve as a source of comfort. All of the beastmen in this continent interacted with some tribe or another, like ours, and were not treated any differently, so the tradition of such a savior did not come to be.”

“Wow... that’s a great way to think about it...” responded Gregono.

It is true that the scope of Shirou's activities did not extend to this side of the world, but it was Will's view that was interesting. As long as the silver wolf was standing right next to Natalia with his head atop his shoulders, he was anything but a fairy tale. However, if it were assumed that he was a fictional being, what other explanation could be the cause?

“Will is also a historian of beastmen and humans,” explained Gregono.

“Is that so? That's great.....” responded Natalia

“Oh, please. It's not that big of a deal. It’s just something I like to document.” Will chuckled and asked, "Do you like to study, Natalia?”

“Yes, I do. I like it. It's fun to learn what you don't know!”

“I see. Me too!”

Will and Natalia smiled at each other.

Natalia was simply happy. The beastmen back home had always treated her like a fool for studying, but Will understood the importance, or rather, the fun of learning. She needed to

talk to Will more. She thought it would be good for Shirou to get some information from her that he did not know, as well.

That's when it happened.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a rough engine, and a car drove through the gap in the rocks into Wakhan Taluka.

The beastmen who had gathered near the entrance fled in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing? You're driving into their home!" Will's shoulders twitched in anger as she let out an angry shout.

Sensing abnormality, the beastmen in the area transformed into their beast forms and gathered the children close to the adults.

The car came to a halt, kicking up a cloud of sand and dust.
Although it was covered in red sand, the curved surface of its black body was as smooth as polished jade. The front end, with its somewhat insect-like appearance, gave off an air of intimidation, as if to show off human power. In a place where there was nothing but simplicity, these civilized industrial machines were extremely elegant, but at the same time, full of hostility.

The door opened and a man in a suit stepped out with a pompous motion. He was a small brown haired man with a crusty-looking face. He looked very different from Will and the others. He was a city man, like the ones Natalia had seen in New York. He didn't have the stark demeanor of Vincent or Jackson, but instead he had an air of cold-heartedness about him.

Two men emerged from the backseat and lined up right behind the first one. Their eyes were covered by sunglasses, but their bodies were huge; at least twice the size of the first man. Unless he had two fathers, they seemed to be his bodyguards.

The small man walked toward Natalia and the others, brushing his face with a handkerchief as he tried to avoid the drifting sand and dust that stained his pitch-black suit.

“Well well well, when I saw that ramshackled truck parked out here in the wilderness, I wasn’t expecting to find a town full of people out here in the middle of nowhere,” the man said cheerfully. His voice stuck in Natalia’s ears.

“Who are you, and what the hell are you doing here?” Gregono, now in his human form, stepped forward.

When he was in his bear form, he had a certain charm, but now his appearance was distinctly fearless. She could see that the bodyguards behind the man in the suit had shoved forward about a thumb’s length.

“My name is Ivan Harriott, and I'm with the Great Western Oil Field Development Organization. Here's my card.”

Gregono looked at the business card he was handed and furrowed his brow, “Oil field development?”

“Yes, sir. We're surveying the oil fields in the area. The country has been consuming a ridiculous amount of oil due to the war, and Europe is experiencing a serious fuel shortage as well. The more new oil fields we drill, the more money we make.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Gregono asked warily, to which Ivan replied without hesitation.

“Yes, we're planning to investigate this area and the upper reaches of the nearby river, so I'm afraid you'll all have to leave.”

“What the hell....!?”

The beastmen who were listening to the conversation were stunned by the audacious one-sidedness of his words and one of them shouted, “Don’t be stupid!” Gregono was about to shout at the man that he could go screw himself, when he was suddenly confronted with a stack of documents.

“This is the land title, and this is the permission form for the survey. The rest is the consent form for everything else. You can read my signature, right? Do you know what a signature is? You write your name. It's proof that you agreed to do it.”

“Whose name is this?”

“Well? All we need is your signature on this form and we're good to go.”

As soon as he heard this, Gregono took the document from him and crushed it into a crumpled mess. If he had been in his beast form, it would have been Ivan's head.

“Ah.... It was such a pain in the ass to make this,” Ivan spat out a few barbed lines, as he watched emotionlessly as the crushed up papers were thrown on the ground.

Gregono spoke without hesitation, “What is the use of such documents? We have lived here since long before you came to the continent. You have no right to tell us what to do.”

"I don't see why not,” Ivan looked around Wakhan Taluka, scratching his head. A small child hiding behind a cart made eye contact with him and ran away with a squeal. Ivan chuckled.

“Are you sure you live here? I don't think any sane person can live in such an uncivilized place.”

Then he added deliberately, “But I could understand if they were savages or dangerous beastmen.”

Gregono and the others' shoulders shook with soundless agitation.

Natalia had heard from Vincent and the others that even in the United States, the position of beastmen was weak. If a human kills a human, they will be judged as having committed a serious crime, but if a human kills a beastman, there are cases where the crime is not even punished, let alone questioned.

The police, the judges, and the criminals all see the beastmen as subhuman creatures. That is the position of beastmen in this country. If they find out that you are a beastman, there is no telling what they will do to you.

“.....There are no beastmen here. This is a place that their ancestors used for rituals. Some of them still cherish it and live here. That's it.” With a pained look on her face, Will squeezed out a voice from beside Natalia.

"Hmm?” Ivan again responded emotionlessly, walking all the way over to Will and peered up at her slumped face from below. “You're a Niyor, aren't you? You're far away from the reservation, and I don’t think you’re allowed to be out here.”

“I have permission.”

“Oh, really? I've heard that the natives had made some strange connections with the state..... Well, I don't care either way,” he talked as if he could do anything about it.

“..... Anyway, I'm sure this is where they live. If they force our hand, we'll go to the authorities.”

Will glared back at Ivan with her eyes full of power. His eyebrows moved slightly as if a breeze had blown, and then he turned around, saying only, "Well, okay.”

“Negotiations only really begin when you are told no. ..... Anyway, I'm going home for today. So long.” he said in an emotionless voice that had never moved from an even temperature. Ivan and the other men then got in the car and drove away.

Gregono and Will looked at each other with seriousness in their eyes, and the beastmen who were observing became upset as well. Natalia glanced at Shirou’s face, his anger and hatred were showing stronger than ever. This town was no paradise after all.

The next morning, Natalia and the children of the town went to fetch water from the stream that flowed right next to Wakhan Taluka. It was the children's job to fetch water three times a day, morning, noon, and night.

"This river is the lifeblood of Wakhan Taluka. If there is ever any construction upstream that affects the water, the beastmen will not be able to survive." Will, who had come along to help, murmured darkly.

She had stayed up late the previous night discussing something with Gregono and the others, and the fatigue was clearly visible on her face. When she realized that her comment had darkened the atmosphere around her, she hurriedly put on a smile and dunked her homemade bucket into the river.

"This used to be a dry river that would only flow when it rained," she said, "Even then, when it flowed, it would become a torrent that was too dangerous to approach. People were suffering."

"How is it so calm now?"

Will smiled, as if she had been waiting for Natalia's question. "Our ancestors and the beastmen worked together to build a dam upstream to control the flow of water. Thanks to their efforts, Wakhan Taluka no longer suffered from water shortages or thirst."

"Wow,..... That's amazing, for both groups."

Nirvasyl, a city very similar to Wakhan Taluka, was also suffering from drought. Here, such water problems were solved by the beastmen working with the humans.

Natalia wondered about Shirou and what he was thinking now. He hadn't spoken a word to her since the day before.

At least..... Natalia looked up at the camp of humans downstream.

She would never have the courage to barge in there alone. She felt that the situation was extremely dangerous after Ivan left, but wondered if Shirou would be able to keep himself from doing such.

"Hey, where'd Orica go?" said one of the beastman children as he looked around at his friends.

"Orica's not here," another replied.

"She's slacking off, isn't she? ....." said another.

"She shouldn't be! Let's have Gregono scold her!"

Natalia and Will couldn't help but smile at each other at the way each spoke. Fetching water was not only a sacred duty for the children to fulfill as members of the town, but also a source of pride.

However, when Natalia returned to town, she discovered that the situation had become very serious. The air in Wakhan Taluka had been heavy and somber since yesterday morning, but even so, the situation was not as dire as it was now. Shirou, Gregono, and the other adults were gathered in the square, their hard faces turned downward.

“What's going on?” Natalia and Will asked as they rushed over.

“Orica has been kidnapped.” Gregono said in a hushed voice. Both Natalia and Will were speechless.

“It seems she was attacked yesterday when she was fetching water in the evening. Orica’s parents died so she is usually with the rest of her family, but at night she is home alone. No one noticed until morning. We found this near the entrance to the town……”

Gregono held out a piece of paper with fold marks on it. It said, “If you want the child, leave as soon as possible.”

It was written in precise handwriting. There was no doubt who the culprit was.

“They knew we were beastmen from the start, didn't they?” Gregono said with a bitter look on his face. “So yesterday was just an inspection. They were trying to find out which one of us was the toughest beastman.”

He turned on his heel silently, but Natalia grabbed on to him just in time.

“What are you going to do, Mr. Ogami!?”

“I'm gonna go beat them up and get Orica,” he responded.

“You can't do this alone. They have guns.” said Gregono as he tried to discourage him.

Shirou just replied, "I can win," and didn't stop moving forward as Natalia was being dragged along.

“The moment you jump in, they'll kill Orica!”

Natalia’s words brought him to a halt. She could hear the sound of his back teeth clenching and creaking.

“So what do we do? Are we going to do what they say?”

Gregono turned around to Shirou and gave him a fierce look, responding in a calm voice, “We have no objection to getting Orica back, but I don't want a reckless assault. Let's plan a strategy.”

“Let us help you.” Spoke Will. Gregono nodded at her offer, but was interrupted by a sharp voice.

“This is a beastman problem. Humans should stay out of it.”

“Mr. Ogami!” Natalia shouted in disapproval, but Shirou did not stop his hostile gaze at Will, or rather, her humanity.

“....I'd like to ask you and the others for your wisdom, Will. Can you help me?”

"Yes. I'll do my best.” Will nodded her head in affirmation to Gregono. Gregono then glared at Shirou to remind him. Their unity was firm, and their decision was correct.

Will cut in front of everyone to ascertain the current situation. “The biggest problem is the guards. They probably have radios and are still keeping their eyes on the town. It's safe to assume that Ivan is in the camp and is aware of our movements.”

“Then should we take out the guards first?” Asked Natalia.

“No, if any one of them loses contact with another, they’ll know something is wrong. They'll be ready for that.”

Will immediately dismissed her, and Natalia groaned. They were a cunning bunch.

“Their camp is on a high plateau with a good view of the river downstream. They're probably on the lookout for our attack, but if we take advantage of the dark of night, a surprise attack is possible,” Gregono pondered.

“But she just said they have guards, right?” Interjected a beastman, and everyone groaned again.

“In other words, as long as we can control what the guards see, we pretty much have the upperhand.” The beastmen around her looked up at Natalia's comment. Will smiled and nodded in satisfaction.

“That's right. If you can hide your first move, your surprise attack will usually be successful. No matter how many lights they prepare, the night vision of the beastmen is far superior.”

This is the crucial moment, Natalia thought, and she began to mumble her thoughts out loud, “Use decoys again? Not like the goats before, but this time...”

“What’s this about goats?”

Will looked at her intrigued as she listened to Natalia explaining the diversion technique she had used before. She listened and nodded several times as if to confirm something, then put her hand on her chin and said, “Those things we brought with us might be useful.”

Then everyone in the room listened in on Will's proposed plan.

“Also, how about something like this?” Natalia added her own ideas.

“Okay..... it's decided. We'll do it tonight,” said Gregono, as everyone nodded strongly, except for one person. Shirou.

"Natalia. Have you seen Ogami?”

The mission was about to begin, and Natalia felt her heart skip a beat as she heard Gregono's words while people were busily coming and going in the darkened Wakhan Taluka square.

“He’s not here? Don’t tell me he went to the camp alone....!?”

“No, I don't think that's the case. I'm sorry, but I need you to go find him. I need as many men as I can get right now.”

“Yes, sir.” As Natalia was about to run away, she heard Gregono's voice call out to her.

“Wait.”

When she turned to look at him, she saw the evening shadows etched on his pensive face, as if he was deep in thought.

“Ogami is trapped in hatred.”

“I understand, sir.” Natalia said, as she nodded quietly.

“He has anger and hatred not only for humans, but also for the reality surrounding beastmen. He hates this world.”

She could not deny what Gregono was saying.

“He must have seen so many terrible things, but I have a feeling he's turned even himself into an object of hatred.”

“What do you mean….?”

When she looked at him questioningly, Gregono said, “I don’t know why, but I just feel it.” He then shook his head in resignation.

“We'll work with Will and the others to get this done. However, if he can’t accept that, then please….don’t force him to join us. From our point of view, Ogami is in a very vulnerable situation. We don't want him to suffer because of us.”

“…..I understand, but I'll try to persuade him, first.”

Natalia turned and ran off this time. As she did, all she could hear was Gregono's soft words say, "I'm sorry.”

Where is Shirou? She thought.

Sensing that he was not in the town, Natalia left the rocky terrain and searched in a different direction from the human campsite. The fact that he had disappeared right before it was time to depart, meant that he had rejected the mission. While that was probably true, he was not the kind of heartless person to abandon others and observe from on high.

As expected she found him. He was sitting on a flat rock, with his back to the town and the human campsite. The moon, which was rising and just beginning to glow white, stretched his shadow long and wide.

“Mr. Ogami, it's time to go!” Natalia called out in a cheerful, yet daringly blunt manner, as if there was nothing to worry about.

His shoulders twitched, then slumped, “I'm not going.”

Natalia took a few steps closer, “What are you talking about? You're not going to help Gregono and the others?”

“I don't want to work with humans.”

“The life of the beastman child is at stake, Orica's life is at stake!” Even when Natalia said this, Shirou did not move.

“Do you hate humans so much that you even hate beastmen who cooperate with humans?”

She knew this to be true. He had always been like that.

“I understand why you hate humans. You have told me about the beginning of your journey. I know what you have seen since then, and the humans you have encountered. They were

selfish, one-sided, and they attacked beastmen. You have been watching such scenes for a thousand years……”

He can't forgive anyone anymore. He can't trust anyone. Who can blame him for feeling that way? The ones to blame are the humans who pushed him to that point, and the world of those humans. His anger is righteous.

“..But right now, a child's life, Orica's life, is at stake. If we lose them, we can't get them back. We can still save her now. If you don't do anything now, you will surely regret it. It will become one more thing causing you to suffer. Let's go, Mr. Ogami, hey!”

“My mind already knows that!”

Shirou's trembling cry cut off Natalia's pleading voice.

“Our first priority right now is to save the lives of the beastmen. Gregono and you are right. We should cooperate with the humans. We have to use whatever we can to save the girl! I know this in my head! My body wants to jump out of my skin right now and go! But……, but my……!”

His fist slammed into the ground.

“My heart won’t respond!”

His voice was sorrowful, as if he were crying. She was sure he was crying.

“Whenever I try to go, my heart pushes me back. I keep hearing, 'Don't forget your home! Remember what the humans did to you! You have already forgiven them!?’…..I loved…… Nirvasyl……! I wanted to protect them……! If only I had more power back then……! If only there were no humans ……! The humans… I hate the humans…… humans….”

“Mr. Ogami……”

He hates humans, he hates the world, and he even hates himself. Natalia thought she understood a little of what Gregono had said.

Natalia started walking, one step at a time, towards Shirou’s turned back.

“I have your anger, I have your hatred. I also lost my people when my village was burned. It may be a small pain compared to the pain you suffered for a thousand years, but if only for a moment, I can understand how you feel.”

She placed her hand on Shirou's trembling shoulder and pressed her forehead against it.

“I have always been fascinated by human culture. As I followed you around, I listened to human music, ate their food, and was moved by all of it. But at the same time, I remember. I remember what they did to me in that camp. Their brutality. I wondered if I could ever forgive the humans, even as I was moved by what they had created.....”

She took a small breath and continued, "But I still think that there are wonderful things in human culture. I think there are some wonderful humans out there! I don't want it all to go down in hatred! I want my mind.... to be free, no matter how painful my past is, no matter how painful my memories are!”

Shirou's shoulders shuddered.

“Because it's frustrating, isn't it...? It's your mind, and you can't do what you want with it. It can't be free....!” Wiping away the tears that had started to flow before she knew it, Natalia looked up.

“I'm going to fight. Even if you don't come.”

She continued, “You have been suffering for a long time. Your pain is immeasurable. Even if you have a supernatural body that can heal all of its physical wounds, your heart is full of scars. I can't ask you to become a brand new animal, but if you can free yourself, even if only for just a moment, please come and help me. I'll be waiting.”

After saying her final words into Shirou, Natalia left. She returned to Gregono and the others, told them that she could not find Shirou, but that she would still participate in the mission. She then left Wakhan Taluka with them.

The opponents were humans with guns. Even if she could sneak up on them, there was no guarantee that she would be safe in the event of a melee. Someone, or even she, might die. Still, she couldn't stop herself from doing it. For herself, and for him.

The moon was becoming obscured by clouds, and the wilderness was about to be covered in deep darkness.

“How are the beastmen doing?”

Two ex-military men, employed by the Great Western Oil Development Organization, look down on the town of beastmen from a hill.

"Look at that.”

One man handed the other binoculars and he frowned at the magnified view.

"What the hell are they doing?”

“Maybe they’re desperate and praying to God.”

The first man had no objection to what his partner said. On the other side of the lens, all he could see was a group of bipedal beasts dancing around a large bonfire. He responded, “"Do they have a god?”

“I'm sure they have one. There's probably an effigy made of straw that’s about to be cursed.”

The man looked at the beastmen in the square one by one, listening to their voices. Bear type, wolf type, tiger type, and rhino type..... He identified all of the dangerous people on his list. He made especially sure to identify the beastman with the eye patch. They were likely the same kind of warriors the men had seen in the war. If the beastmen were planning an attack, there was no way these beastmen would not join in, but they were all dancing by the fire like idiots.

“I don't know what these animals are thinking.”

The man laughed and spat, then turned to a nearby radio and sent out a routine message, "All clear.”

The cold night wind of the wilderness soaked into his bones more than he expected. After pouring whiskey down his throat and snacking from his beloved skittles, the man cursed God and his employer for sending him to the edge of the Earth with only a thin blanket.

The animals were dancing around the fire. Their usually joyful and proud dance was not as graceful tonight as it had been in the past. Dressed in a bear costume with an eye patch, Will continued to circle around the fire, exaggerating her dance movements so that she would stand out and be seen. It was a "powwow," a festival of friendship among the tribes. She never anticipated that the traditional costumes she had brought with her for this purpose, which were made to look like great animals, would come in handy in such a situation. If one is not accustomed to seeing beastmen transformed into their beast forms, it would be difficult to spot a Niyor among the beastmen. Will, in particular, had always watched Gregono's unique dancing from up close. She was confident that she could dance better than he could.

“Please return safely, everyone. Gregono.....” Will wished her departing compatriots good luck, grateful for the long history of interaction her ancestors had built with the beastmen.

The humans' campsite was larger than they had expected, surrounded by a number of loaded vehicles. Natalia and the others were laid prone in the sparse shrubbery, trying to get a better look. The camp was peaceful, they could even hear the occasional drunken laugh.

“Good, the guards don't seem to have noticed us. Will and the others did a good job.” said Gregono in a low voice. He had transformed into a grizzly bear. His companions gave a sigh of relief but it was short lived.

“This is it, the enemy has guns,” his warning immediately brought back the sense of tension.

Natalia had already explained the threat to them. A bear or rhinoceros beastman with a strong body might be able to withstand a small-gauge pistol, but the humans know they are going up against beastmen. They had likely prepared powerful firearms to kill the group.

“You know what to do.”

“Yes, sir.” Natalia answered quickly and nodded.

Gregono and his men were going to attack the camp and cause a commotion. While that happened, Natalia was to rescue Orica. With Will and the others included, the plan relied on two levels of diversion. Natalia, who is unable to fight directly, was chosen for her part in the mission because of her small size, agility, and her experience in attacking and defending against humans. The fact that she had survived being shot at by a gang in New York harbor seemed only coincidental, though.

“The moon is still covered, now's your chance. We'll move as soon as we see you enter.”

“Please be careful of their weapons.”

Natalia transformed into a beast. Her hair began to fall out, revealing her true nature as a naked mole-rat. Her skin became more sensitive and acute and she could read the direction of the wind on her face.

After seeing a picture of a girl with beautifully dressed hair in a book in her village, Natalia didn't like her beast form very much. Even though her hair would grow back as soon as she was in human form again, she felt that her naked head was very ugly and disgusting. She had not transformed into a beast since she had started her journey. She did not want him to see her like this.

However, she could not afford to think like that right now. There was no silver wolf to rely on. She would have to use all of her strength to fight. Natalia ran through the dark night, moving along the ground on all fours and around to the back of the campsite.

So far, so good. She could tell through her skin that the guards they had tricked at Wakan Taluka had not alerted the camp and that no one was wary of her presence.

She searched for Orica’s scent, or rather, the scent of a beastman.

What.....? That’s strange. A beastman's scent, but more than one.....?

Hurriedly, she searched again for Orica based on the smell of the whole town of Wakhan Taluka.
Natalia found her. She was surrounded by the smell of metal and rubber.

She must be in a car, Natalia thought.

Natalia snuck into the area where a number of cars were parked, masking any sign of her presence as she searched, but Orica wasn't there.

A vehicle parked near the humans' tent looked suspicious. It was a large truck, and she could just barely hear the muffled sound of a small voice sobbing inside. There's no doubt about it.

There she is.

Just as she was about to move, her toe collided with something. It made a loud sound and rolled away. It was an empty can that had been discarded.

"Who's that!?"

A human heard the sound and pointed a light in her direction, and the circle of light fell right next to Natalia. She quickly dove into a nearby bush, but she could still easily be seen if the light shone directly on her.

Damn it....!

As panic filled her chest, a shadow jumped into the circle of light that fell on the ground.

"Kaa!"

It was Kuro.

"What the,... a crow? You scared the hell out of me." The human clicked his tongue and kicked the ground roughly, throwing sand at Kuro. Suddenly, a gunshot rang out on the other side of the camp.

"W-What the hell is going on!?"

Gregono and the others rushed in. The humans turned bloodthirsty and ran in the direction of the sound of gunfire.

"Thank you, Kuro!"

"Kaaah! Ka-....."

Natalia hugged him extremely tightly, and he squawked and flapped his wings in distress. The soft feel of his feathers reassured her, and Natalia approached the back of the vehicle with determination.

The sound of gunfire rang out, accompanied by flashes of light, as pebbles and pieces of earth ricocheted off the ground and struck his fur. Even though he knew that it was important that he attract the humans' attention, he was having a hard time restraining his legs from making him flee into the darkness.

"Spread out! Don't stand still!" Responding to Gregono's scolding, his compatriots ran around in the dark night.

Even with moving targets, there was no guarantee that all the scattered bullets would miss everyones' bodies.

Since when did beastmen, who have always had the upper hand in hand-to-hand fights, start to become outmatched by humans in head-to-head combat? In the days of bows and spears, even beastmen children were not threatened by them, As he pondered his incomprehensible thoughts, Gregono rushed forward, causing a human to fire and miss.

If we push them too far, they will use Orica as a shield. Ideally, we should be able to antagonize them lightly enough to draw them out, but if we take too much time, they may realize that this was a diversion. However...

Looking directly at the approaching ricochets of bullets bouncing off the ground and feeling like he was being chased by a poisonous snake, Gregono dove into the darkness where there were no lights and exhaled heavily.

I don't think I can take much more of this.....! Offense is the best defense. That is to say, the safest thing to do is to give your opponent only enough time to shield themselves. What we're doing now is the exact opposite.

It had been a long time since Natalia had infiltrated the camp. Believing that she had already found the hostage or even escaped, Gregono made the decision to go on the offensive.

"Oh my God!"

A rock the size of a man's head just missed a human. Even though they can't make weapons as complicated as firearms, beastmen have always had weapons that could kill with a single blow.

"Whoa, that was close!"

"Shit, where did that come from? There!”

The humans who reacted to the stone throwing turned their guns and scattered bullets all at once into a corner of the darkness

There was a gap in some of the gunfire and Bal, a buffalo beastman, leaped into the opening and rammed the humans one by one.

"Way to go, Bal!”

The last one, who tried to retreat in a hurry, was also defeated by another beastman who was hiding behind a car, and Gregono and the others were finally able to catch their breath.

“Did you kill them all, by any chance? Maybe we should have done this from the start.” Bal snickered as he stroked his prized horns.

“Don't let your guard down yet. A gun is a weapon that can kill a man with one finger.” Gregono said as he was about to head for the tent when he heard a loud noise. A square hole appeared in the starry sky.

“What?!”

Immediately afterwards, a human car came falling down, crashing through the night sky.

"Whoa!”

"Bal!”

Although he escaped the direct hit, the erratically bouncing car caught Bal off guard and sent him flying. A huge, earth-shaking step almost knocked Gregono off his feet. Then, from the direction from which the car had flown, appeared...

“It’s a beastman.....!”

Dressed in what was probably the largest human combat uniform ever made, was a hippopotamus beastman with sharp eyes. Gregono read the intense murderous intent in the small eyes under his thick eyelids and knew immediately that he was not an ally.

“There were beastmen soldiers, too?! No wonder Ivan was so smug!”

Gregono shouted out and threw a punch at the hippo. A battle between the bear and a hippopotamus, something which would never happen in the natural world, ensued. It ended when the hippopotamus ducked downward to avoid the first blow then, grabbing the bear by the feet, he used both of his arms to throw Gregono.

"You son of a bitch!"

A cheetah beastman jumped at the bear from behind, but just as he was about to thrust his fangs into him, Gregono grabbed the cheetah by the neck and knocked him to the ground.

When Gregono turned and saw Bal's face, who's eyes were rolled back with his head limp, he knew his opponent was an extremely talented warrior. Warriors do not stand still when they are on the cusp of victory. The hippopotamus quickly picked up a fallen machine gun. His posture, with his huge arms and hands held in a surprisingly precise manner, clearly showed that he had been a part of the human battlefield and had handled firearms.

I'm going to be shot!

Cold blood rushed through Gregono's body, and his muscles contracted inward as he prepared for the gunshot.

"AwwoooooOOOOOooooooo....."

The wolf's howl, as if falling from the sky, slowed the hippo beastman's trigger finger. In the next instant, five trails of light fell down and cut the machine gun in half at the middle. Claws. Claws sharp and strong enough to cut through metal with ease. The man stood up from his crouched position in front of the startled hippopotamus, who backed away. The moon, which had been hidden by clouds, illuminated the wilderness and the man with the gray fur.

The silvery wolf was here.

Earlier...

After Natalia left, Shirou was still stuck there. What she had said was right and wise. It was clear to him that he should follow her. However, even though he knew that much, even though he had already convinced himself that she was right, he just couldn't act. It was not just a petty thing like being stubborn, or hard-headed; the core of his heart had become so rigid, or fossilized, that he couldn't move his feet.

Soon, he heard the sound of gunfire in the distance. The roar of firing rounds that would have rattled his head if he had heard it at close range was reduced to small popping sounds at his current distance. Among them, there were those who were fighting. Their lives were now in danger. That girl, too.

"What the hell am I doing here?! I'm..."

He put all the strength he had into his legs and stood up. However, the heaviness of his heart would not allow him to move any further.

My body is hopelessly heavy. I can't even muster up the energy. Even if I made it to the battlefield, I would only be a hindrance to them. It would be better to just stay here and cower in silence.

"There you are!"

When a voice unexpectedly sounded from behind him, Shirou's whole body stiffened.

"Oh, uh, the wolf, the traveler..."

He looked back over his shoulder slightly and saw a young beastman boy standing just out of the corner of his eye. It must have taken a beastman's strength to get this far, because he was transformed into his beast form. He was a sheep beastman. He was the same child Shirou had often seen in the square.

"Gregono and the others have left. Are you not... going to go with them?"

Shirou didn't answer. He couldn't answer. He just continued to stare at the boy. As if unable to stand to look into Shirou's eyes, the boy turned his head and stammered several times, but then turned back and bowed his head as if he had regained his resolve and made up his mind.

"I beg you! Please save Orica!"

His heart creaked in his chest. His dry, twisted heart ached. What could he say to this child? He shouldn't have to be asked to do this, he should just be doing it. However, Shirou still refused and remained silent. The boy looked up to see Shirou's response, and then suddenly came around in front of him. The boy easily overstepped the boundary of space Shirou had wanted to maintain.

"This is my treasure, I'll give it to you.....!"

"What.....!?"

What he saw took Shirou's breath away.

"This is ....."

"I saw you in the square, and you seemed to be looking at it kind of closely. I thought you might want it."

Shirou took it softly, with a trembling hand. It was a sheep doll. Handcrafted and decorated. It looked exactly like the one Shirou had failed to give to Naki in Nirvasyl. Something welled up from the depths of his heart, filling the dry and twisted thing.

“……It's beautiful.” Shirou was mumbling to himself.

The boy’s face lit up, “Yeah! The decorations are very fine and beautiful. I like it very much. A friend of mine from the Niyor tribe made it for me.

Ah…!

Shirou had to fight off the feeling of tears about to spill out of both of his eyes. In a town much like his home, he met a beastman much like his friend, and the doll he couldn't give to him is now also here. The smiling face he couldn’t see, the face he wanted to see, is still here.

What is this? Is this some kind of illusion, or is this some kind of opportunity that comes around once in a thousand years? If I could do it all over again, I would go to ……. No, that is impossible. This is not Nirvasyl, and he is not Naki, but that's okay. Be it an excuse, illusion, whatever. If I can really still keep my promises here and now, then… Shirou fell deep into thought.

“I want you to keep this.”

“What? But…”

“Just take care of it, that's all that matters.”

If only I can forgive myself a little.

“Well okay, but what about Orica?” asked the boy.

If only I can be free.

“Oh. I've just been taking a little time to prepare.”

I'm coming to save you… all of you. I'll keep my promises this time.

"Orica…… Orica, are you there?”

A muffled groan came back as Natalia called out into the darkness of the covered truck.

“It's Natalia. Wait for me. I'll help you now.”

Orica was tied up with a rope and gagged and rolled in the back of the truck. After Natalia had chewed up the rope with her powerful front teeth, the frightened girl jumped into her

chest and sobbed. Natalia softly stroked along her back, “It's okay. We'll get you out of here soon.”

"Oh, that's not going to happen.”

Natalia turned around as if she had been struck by a bullet, towards the insistent voice that followed her own words.

Outside the covered bed of the truck and illuminated by lights, Ivan stood with a gun at the ready.

They're on to us!

Ivan spoke in his emotionless tone, “Please come out quietly. I didn’t think you barbarians would actually come to get her back....., but it’s okay. I was starting to feel bad that I had pulled such a cheap trick, but you all have blown away my expectations. I’m going to have that whole village killed. We won't have to worry about disposing of the bodies, we brought plenty of explosives.”

No...!!

Natalia was horrified and speechless. His comment was so cruel that her mind and body froze. How could anyone be so brutal? It was hard for her to believe that he was human like Will. A single bullet from the muzzle of his gun would easily kill her and Orica. A metal cast, a few centimeters long and without any blood or tears of its own, could take their lives without any effort at all. How could such injustice and cruelty be allowed to exist?

We have no power or means to fight back. Death will always be with the beastmen. It is just coming for me now. I have no choice.... I’m going to die.

“AwwoooooOOOOOooooooo.....”

The nostalgic howl sent a burning blood rush through Natalia's heart.

You came!

That was all she needed. In an instant, Natalia's mind had been saved from death’s spell. She grabbed Orica by the shoulders and slammed her down to the truck bed with no time for restraint. Orica screamed as Natalia then shoved her into the darkness in the corner and then quickly lowered her own posture and turned on her heel.

“You bitch!”

Ivan opened fire. Sparks flew around Orica, as she curled tighter on the floor of the truck bed and continued to scream. Due to the position of the light, Ivan could not see into the cover

overhanging the truck bed and was firing blindly. Natalia accelerated herself out the back of the truck, hooking her toes on the edge of the tailgate, and leaping forward as fast as she could.

Flashes flew in her eyes as she collided with a thud. She could feel the full force of the impact on the top of her head, completely breaking Ivan's thin nose. A no-cushion blow. She guessed it worked a little better than it would have if she had hair.

"Orica, we have to run!"

Leaving Ivan to hold his face in agony, Natalia ran off with Orica.

"Wait! You fucking animals!" Ivan's voice immediately shouted after them.

In spite of his weak appearance, he seemed to have a high tolerance for pain. Orica's gait was weak due to her hands and feet having been so tightly bound. It was only a matter of time before he caught up with them, as she was almost standing still. When they came to a rock wall, Natalia stopped in her tracks. Suddenly, a light came on behind them, casting both of their shadows on the wall.

"That's far enough."

When she turned around, she saw Ivan; half of his body enveloped by the light, blood dripping from his twisted nose, and a snarky smile on his face. He was furious and raging. That much was clear to her.

"This is the punishment for underestimating humans. Don't expect an easy death, you animal."

"You're wrong." Natalia said to Ivan as she saw for a moment, thanks to the light, that there was a thin stream of water flowing at her feet.

"We are not animals. We are humans."

"Huh? What are you talking about? What's human about you people, you freaks! Humans don't look like animals! We're not capable of animal-like stupidity!"

He was so agitated that even the basic shape of his face was deformed, and she was afraid that he might pull the trigger at any moment, but Natalia felt calm. She had already done what she had to do, now all she had to do was tell him so.

"They also, in the end, recognized us as just a different kind of human being."

"What did you say? What the hell are you talking about, you bitch!?"

“I'm talking about the war.”

“What....!?”

She guessed it was because she had said something that got under his skin. As soon as Natalia saw Ivan turn his nose up at her, she knew she had won.

“As a result, they changed their minds. They realized that the beastmen were not experimental animals, but a threat that should not be thought of in the same way as animals. We have our own wisdom and ability to think. They understood that if they underestimated us, they would be the ones who would suffer.”

The water hit his shoes and made a noise. Ivan perked up and turned the light on his feet. The water, which had flowed only as trickle earlier, now spread out over the feet of all three of them.

“As long as we have wisdom, we’ll have a plan.”

Suddenly there was a roar and a tremendous flash flood hit Natalia, Orica, and Ivan.

She didn't care if Ivan could scream or not. She just took a deep breath, bent over in an embrace with Orica, and let the torrent engulf them. She didn't need to consume oxygen unnecessarily in struggling to stay afloat on the surface of the water, unable to see what was above or below her. She simply held her breath and waited for the right moment.

The swirling water soon regained a steady flow. At the same time, she felt something slipping under her body which made Natalia and Orica rise to the surface.

"Pfft-AH!”

Natalia and Orica opened their mouths wide and took fresh air into their lungs.

"Good job! Well done!”

“We're going to drift to the right location. Take a break for a while!” Supporting the girls from below were the beaver beastmen. They were the caretakers of the dam that regulates the amount of water upstream. They released the water so that Natalia, after retrieving Orica, could quickly escape from the campsite. That was Natalia's plan.

"Where’s Ivan?” Natalia asked, leaning against the backs of beaver beastmen.

“I don't know, but if he was lucky enough to survive that, he won't have the strength to do anything about us.”

Only beastmen with animal strength could swim through this torrent. The tones of their voices were filled with such pride.

"Whoa!!!"

Each time his log-like arm swung out, a cloud of dust rose from the ground and traced the path of his fist. His rounded claws were not sharp, but in human terms, they were the equivalent of having a lump of iron in your fist. If a beastman with half his strength were to be hit with such a strike, it was obvious that the arm they were guarding with would be ripped off their torso.

However, Shirou just slid backwards more than ten meters, the soles of his feet scraping the ground as he caught the blow. It was like stopping a tank, with added rushing power.

"AAAggggAAH!"

Shirou took his opponent's arm and pivoted, sending him flying over his head, and slamming him into the ground. With a boom, a hippopotamus sized dent was made in the hard surface of the earth, and a moment later, dust and sand flew up in concentric circles.

"You got him!?"

The moment he heard Gregono and the others' voices, the hippo beastman's hand broke through the dust cloud and grabbed Shirou's head.

“Agh...!?”

His feet left the ground and the night sky spread out in his vision. This time it was Shirou arching through the air, and a moment later, the back of his head was slammed into the ground.

“Bastard.....!”

Shirou grabbed the hippo beastman by the throat while he was still holding his face. He then lifted his opponent high and sent him plummeting to the ground once more.

“UHHHH!”

“AAGGGHHHH!”

Both of them roared at the same time. A series of roars and violent tremors followed. Dust soared. When Shirou struck, the Hippo Beastman struck back. When the Hippo Beastman struck, Shirou struck back. They circled the human campsite like a wheel, alternately

smashing each other's faces in. When they had returned to their original position where Gregono and the others were standing, they simultaneously smashed each other's face into the ground with all of their arm strength, and the impact blew them both into the sky at the same time.

“W-What a fight! Are you a monster, Ogami?”

“That's not what you say to your allies! Ask him!” Swearing back at Gregono’s comment, Shirou then glared back at the hippo beastman. Like him, his opponent's figure was tattered from the struggle so far. However, his eyes had not lost their fighting spirit at all.

“AAAAAGGGH!” The hippo beastman rushed forward.

”I knew that the hippo-beastmen were extremely strong, but..." Shirou grunted as they clasped hands and began to push against each other. It only took a few seconds for their strength to even out. The ground on Shirou's side, which he had been pushing against, shattered, and his body was pushed backwards as if he was being blown away.

“It's not every day you find an opponent this tough!” Shirou yelled out. “Why is a warrior like you working for the humans!?”

"A ..... warrior, ...?” A muffled voice replied. The hippopotamuses' grip on Shirou’s hands weakened momentarily.

Now is my chance.

“AAAAAGGHHHH!!!”

Shirou deliberately fell backwards, and swung his arms up as hard as he could, sending the hippo beastman stumbling forward. The hippopotamus, unable to catch himself due to its arms being in Shirou’s grip, launched face-first into the ground. The momentum of his previous lunge multiplied his impact, and the hard landing gouged out the ground for more than ten meters.

“Finish him off!”

Shirou ran to catch up with the still sliding hippo beastman, jumped, and delivered a kick right to the neck area with all of his might. The aim and timing were both perfect. However...

“What the hell!?”

In the depths of the dust blown up by the impact of the kick, Shirou saw a small pair of eyes ignite. Shirou's kick had been caught by the hippo beastman with his arms crossed. The hippo released his crossed guard and grabbed Shiro's leg with one hand, while his other formed a clenched his fist. The compressed air in his fingers creaked with a crisp pop. The

biggest counterattack of all was coming. Shirou's back suddenly heated up with frustration, but the hippopotamus's sharp movements were mixed with an inexplicable aura of confusion.

“What!?”

Shirou looked at him closer. In his opponent's eyes, he could see the reflection of another human machine gun that had fallen right at his feet.

I understand. This guy is lost. He is thinking if he should smash me with his fist or pick up the gun. If you are a true beastman, one should never hesitate to use their own body at moments like these.

“You idiot!”

That moment was his downfall. Shirou lifted one of his legs and kicked the ground with such force that it exploded, and he shot his fist with all his might at the side of the hippopotamus. The momentary conflict of mind may have been a shock to Shirou’s opponent. He could not trust his own strength. He felt that the gun was stronger than himself.

A beast with an unsettled mind cannot fight. The beastman, unable to take any defensive stance, was smashed in the cheek by Shirou’s fist and slammed into the ground directly below. He bounced a few meters, covered in dust, and then crashed, arms and legs outstretched, not bothering to bace for the impact.

“You've lost your beastman pride. You don't need these fangs”

Shirou stomped on the lower jaw of the hippopotamus and grabbed on to his tusks. This enemy was not a warrior. He was just a human servant. It was a person he could not accept, and would never tolerate. However..

“You’re right.”

“What....?” Shirou's brow furrowed at the resignation in the voice that replied.

“I fought for that beastman's pride, and all of my friends died except me. The only way to help those who survived was to work for the humans. This is the only atonement I can make for the pride I've taken in sending everyone to their deaths. If you want to take..... my tusks with you, go ahead and do so...”

He looked down for a moment at the small eyes that were rapidly losing their dominance, and then Shirou took his hands away.

“Your fangs will stay intact.”

“What...?”

This beastman is still fighting.

“I know what you smell like. Hold on a little longer. When I'm done,.... I'm coming to get you.” Shirou said as he turned to walk away.

“Okay....” The hippopotamus smiled wearily. “It's like you're the legendary Silver Wolf.” He mumbled, and then became quiet, as if he had let go of his thread of consciousness.

“Kaa, Kaa.” The starry sky cawed, and a crow came down and perched on Shirou's shoulder.

He looked over and saw Natalia and the beastman child, being protected by the beaver beastman. Gregono and the other beastmen got up and greeted the girls. Shirou smiled and Natalia laughed as well.

“Let's go home, Natalia.”

“Yeah, let's go home, Mr. Ogami.”

Wakkan Taluka was jubilant at the safe return of their friends. All of the humans' weapons had been destroyed, and their vehicles had been disabled, except for one large one. Almost all of them had regained consciousness, but there was nothing they could do now except flee. The powwow that they had originally planned to have turned into a victory party. The festival, where both humans and beastmen joined together to perform an original tribal dance, was more exciting than ever for Natalia, who was seeing such a thing for the first time. Partly due to the Niyor tribe's costumes, which resembled animals, it was impossible to distinguish between humans and beastmen. Everyone was the same. As Natalia sat on a stone bench alongside Shirou, watching the scene, Gregono and Will came up next to them.

“Ogami, Natalia, there's something you need to hear.” Gregono said.

Natalia noticed that Will was closer to him than usual.

“We are all leaving Wakhan Taluka.”

Shirou looked over at him as if he had been punched in the face. Gregono lowered his eyes in vexation.

“Humans like Ivan will come again. No, in fact, they have already visited us many times. This is just the first time it has turned into a big deal like this..... Next time, someone will come along who will take more aggressive measures. When that happens, we won't be able to protect our people.”

"Then I'll protect you guys. I will always protect you. So…" Shirou's voice was almost pleading. This is an important place for him as well.

“But at some point, you won’t be able to protect us. As long as we live here, there will be no rest for the beastmen.”

It was Will who spoke up instead of the nodding Gregono. Shirou gritted his teeth and glared at her, but, “What Will is saying is not wrong. She is also sad to say goodbye to us. There's nothing I can do about it. It cannot be helped……”

When he heard Gregono say this with a heavy heart, Shirou turned his head away. He let out a loud sigh that seemed to dissipate his anger. “Okay…” Natalia heard him say in a quiet voice.

“We won't be able to do this powwow again for a while.”

“We'll do it again, I promise.”

Will's voice followed Gregono's lonely words. They were huddled together, their hands clasped tightly. The two must have been lovers. A beastman and a human.

Natalia turned away from them and stared at the fire crackling in the plaza, and asking no one in particular, “Can't beastmen and humans coexist?”

The answer came quickly.

“We can. In fact, we have done so.”

It was Will. Natalia continued.

“I have seen beastmen and humans all over the place. Humans do persecute beasts, but there are times when beastmen are at fault. Beastmen are rough and violent, and they don't even know it. The two races are incompatible.”

“That's because those beastmen have just met humans. It will take time for them to get used to each other,” responded Will.

“Time….?”

Natalia glanced at Will before leaning forward and looking at her more intently.

“One feels compelled to shout louder, to stick one's own hands in and change the world immediately. They feel defeated when they are told that only time will solve the problem. However, it is not a defeat. In my hometown, we grow a special flower to make the blue of this

dress. It took generations to cross-breed the best flowers with each other. It can't be done rapidly. You have to wait a long, long time."

"We beastmen," said Gregono. "According to legend, are those who have used one of the possibilities that reside in themselves. That's how we got the form of the beasts we believe in. However, that does not mean that they have lost all their potential. The beastmen can still change themselves."

His gaze shifted to Will and he smiled at her. Her shoulders moved a little, perhaps because she grasped his hand again.

"Humans can change too." Will said softly.

"Humans are very vulnerable at a very young age, and even as adults, there are large individual differences. If we don't train ourselves, we will remain weak, and if we don't learn, we will remain ignorant. Why is that? It would be easier if we had everything from the beginning."

Her voice became excited, "The reason there is a 'margin' in human ability, is for responding to the times. Heaven created us as creatures full of gaps so that we could fill them with what we needed at that time. Now, our clan and the beastmen are being ostracized and attacked by the humans from the cities, but things will change."

"Humans will never change. They are and always have been cowards." As if in response to Shirou's stern voice, the firewood in the square exploded loudly.

He was still stubborn, but Gregono calmly agreed with him, "The anger is ours too. If only they weren't here. There are those among the Niyor who feel that way about the humans of the city. However, that is not a just world."

"A just world?" Natalia asked.

Gregono nodded. "They are here, and we are here. That is the true nature of this world. It is not just to erase anything. We have to accept the world and change."

"Accept and change...." The phrase repeated in Natalia's mind and sank deep into her heart.

"That might mean letting go of something. However, it is a necessary thing, just like a child gives up a toy as they grow up. It is not giving in to the other person, and it's not evil." Will continued.

"Are you satisfied? That's not how it works." Shirou's words echoed heavily in Natalia's mind as he spat them out.

Shirou did indeed come to help. However, nothing has changed in the world as he sees it now. Therefore, he won't be able to change it either.

She had figured out what he needed and what he didn't need. She also now knew what side she was on.

The festival of the beastmen and the Niyor people continued unabated until late into the night. It was as if everyone already knew that this was the last time.

Orica and a human child invited Natalia to dance. There was no way she knew how they danced, but she danced with them as she saw fit. It was fun. It was really, really fun.

The next morning. As the sun rose, Gregono and the others gathered at the entrance to the town.

"We'll head north," said Gregono.

"We'll see you soon," Will replied.

Everyone hugged each other and shed tears in farewell.

"We'll follow you as guards until you find a new place to live." Shirou said and looked at Natalia.

"Let's go, Natalia."

"I'm not going."

"Huh?" Shirou's shoulders shook as if he was upset by the reply.

"We talked about it yesterday and decided. I'm staying behind with Will and the others, and she's taking me to the city. So this is where we say goodbye."

"W-What...?"

It was refreshing to her to see him so confused for once, but she didn't want him to continue to be if she could help it.

"I wanted to save you." said looking directly at Shirou.

"What do you mean?" He replied.

"I thought that if I could understand your hatred, even if only a little, I might be able to do that. I wanted to stay with you forever and support you, but that's not good enough."

A sad smile appeared on her face.

“Even if I could be there for you, we would both sink into the same depths of anger. What you needed was not me. What you really need is...”

The crease between his eyebrows deepened dubiously as he waited for more words.

“A person with a clean slate. A person full of hope and potential who can blow away anger and despair. Someone who can become anything from that point forward. That's not me. I cannot become a brand new animal either.”

I feel like I am about to burst into tears. I didn't think it would be so hard to admit clearly in my own words that I’m not the right person to help him, but I can't show my weakness here. I want him to leave in peace. I want to be able to leave him strong.

“I will study beastmen and humans in this country, and try to bring the two races together in peace, so that your anger at the world may be softened.”

"……How?” His question was quiet.

“First, we need a time and a place where beastmen can learn about the human world in peace. For example,..... a place like a school.”

“You will never be able to get that.”

The denial even seemed to smile at her. It was as if he was praying that she would try.

“Until then, keep living your life the way you do. Keep on living. Wherever you are in the world, I will bring this change to you.”

“……Okay.”

They exchanged a sad smile and quietly completed their farewell.

They did not hug each other, nor did they vow to meet again.

“Good-bye.”

Natalia, along with Will and the others, watched the distant beastmen for a long time until they disappeared in the distance, behind a cloud of sand and dust. Forever.

BNA ZERO
EPILOGUE

エピローグ

Epilogue

The view of the city from the window of the mayor's office was different from any other city she had ever seen. The paperwork had already reached a level of busyness beyond what could be called hard work, but it was only now that the city spread out behind the glass would officially come to life.

Anima City, a city of beastmen. It was the night before the opening ceremonies. Even though the streets around the city hall had already been developed, there was still major construction going on day and night in the distance. Even after the migrants arrive tomorrow, the beastmen will continue to build the city before their eyes.

A continuation....

Yes. This is not the end, and it is not the beginning. It's a continuation. A continuation of something that started a long time ago. It's just like one of those times. The woman looked at her reflection in the glass window, and felt a slight sense of satisfaction in the dull eyes that seemed to be starting to resemble his. These were not the eyes of someone who was dulled by pain. They were the eyes of someone who had been hurt and was still fighting back.

She heard someone standing in front of the door of the mayor's office. The air was calm and serene, a step or two removed from the hustle and bustle of the immigration officials downstairs, who were busy with the paperwork.

She giggled at the hesitant flicker of hesitation, and immediately threw a "please" towards the direction of the door.

He walks in.

He is a very private person, neither the receptionist nor her secretary, Ishizaki, accompanied him. She calls out his name.

"Mr. Ogami."

He gave a small "hello" and looked around the mayor's office a little absent-mindedly. There was a desk and a reception area separated by a partition. There were pictures of the people who had worked so hard to establish the city, as well as some of her teachers and mentors that she would never forget. There was also a perch for Kuro.

Finally, he smiled quietly as he looked at the night time scene that had just begun to unfold behind her.

"I've lost, Natalia. I never thought you would be building a city of beastmen, let alone a school."

“I now go by the name of Barballet Rosé.” Rosé shrugged and smiled back as she relaxed a little.

“Savagery and fraternity, civilization and wilderness, intensity and serenity, and many other things come together to create something new. That's what this name means.”

“Did you cut your hair?”

If a stranger had asked her that, she would probably be stunned to hear that as the second thing said to her after reuniting for the first time in decades, but to Rosé, it was a question with meaning and significance. She stroked her scalp where not a single hair was growing.

"Yes. When I meet people, I can make my position clearer if I'm in beast form..... It would be more difficult to clean up the hair if I had to scatter it every time I met someone.”

“I thought you weren't too fond of your beast form.” Shirou asked a little awkwardly, and Rosé rolled her eyes slightly.

“You noticed that?”

'Well, it was a long journey.”

His joking tone of voice was unusual for him, and she felt a flicker of youthfulness in her heart as she realized that this was a sign of familiarity.

“In addition, you've got wrinkles between your eyes. Relax a little more.”

“I don't need you to tell me what to do.”

They both took playful shots at each other.

“....This is who I am now.” Rosé stood her small body upright as much as she could and looked at Shirou.

He narrowed his eyes and loosened his mouth. “You're getting stronger. You were such a helpless little girl.”

He glanced at the doctorate certificates and trophies from various research presentations displayed on a shelf in the corner of the room. “Everywhere I went, I heard about you. Nowadays, it's not unusual to see you on TV, but in the early days, everyone was glued to the screen. You were the star of hope for all beastmen. No, ... you became the star of hope.”

There are beastmen who live quietly in human cities, beastmen who live a traditional life in the forest, beastmen who live strong in the darkness of the city, and beastmen who continue to look forward despite persecution. She began to wonder if they all thought the same thing.

No, don’t do that.

She reiterated in her heart that they did. The many letters she received were proof of that. The goat beastmen, tiger beastmen, black panthers, bears, rhinos, cheetahs, dolphins, and beavers all cheered her on.

She says, half-turning her body and looking down at the city with one side of her face, “It is only with the cooperation of many people that we can do this. In this Anima City, we can give the beastmen time and space. The beastmen can learn about the world and accept the world gracefully.”

She was a little afraid of what he would say next. Would he still spit out, "I don't need to learn about humans," or would he just walk out without a word?

The hands behind her back trembled slightly. She mocked herself for not being able to face Shirou squarely in the eyes. It was as if she were on guard. Even though she had withstood all kinds of negative voices until today, she was afraid of only one person. She was afraid of Shirou Ogami's reply. Then he said something she never thought he would say.

“I want to help too.” Those were his words.

"What……!?”

As if she had been hit by a bullet, Rosé immediately turned towards Shirou.

“The legendary silver wolf is lending his power over to me and this city?” The reason why she stated it a bit indirectly was because if she didn't, she felt she would have lost her dignity as the head of the city in an instant and would have jumped out of her skin. Dignity is very important for a beastman.

“I'm just a beastman, that is all," he chuckled. “Anima City is a place where beastmen can live without being threatened by humans. There's no place like it anywhere else in the world. I want to protect this place. I want to protect it this time.”

Is it Nirvasyl or Wakhan Taluka in his clenched fist? Rosé wondered.

Regardless, this was a very, very important development.

“It will be so reassuring to have you here, Mr. Ogami. You've guided so many beastmen in the pa-.”

When she looked back at him expectantly, he lifted his hand in a small gesture to stifle Rosé's words. “I told you. I'm just a wolf beastman. You're the one who's supposed to lead us in this town. Wolves obey their boss. You know that, right?”

".....Yes, I do."

She shook her head slightly, realizing her weakness in trying to rely on him again without realizing it, but she kept those feelings to herself. For a while, she looked at him with a gentle, clever gaze, as if he were the only friend she had ever known.

“Well I look forward to working with you, Special Advisor.”

"Yes, ma’am, Mayor Barballet Rosé.”

Clear air and tension had flowed between them, but then slowly melted into smiles. Tomorrow, Anima City will begin. At present, there are 80,000 people who wish to move to the city. This number is expected to grow as the city's reputation spreads. The United Nations has acknowledged the existence of the beastmen in a statement, letting the world know that "they have always been here.” However, the appearance of these new, internationally recognized inhabitants will cause a major disturbance in the existing world order. The rights and obligations of the new inhabitants, as well as the treatment of migratory bird beastmen that do not belong to any one country, will be discussed.....

Although their existence has been recognized by far more people than before, beastmen are still persecuted all over the world and have nowhere to go and nowhere to live. The beastmen need help now more than ever, to live with everyone and survive as members of this world.

Hopefully, Anima City will become a second home for many beastmen - and for their only savior of the wounded and weary - a place where he can heal his heartbreak and anger. This was the only wish of the girl who was once called Natalia.

End.

Biography

Thank you very much for picking up this work. It's nice to meet you. For those of you who haven't seen me in a while. I'm Ise. This time, I've written a spin-off of the anime "BNA" written by Trigger Inc. In the anime, the main setting is Anima City, a town where only beastmen live, so in the novel, I tried to approach the world outside of Anima City, a world where beastmen (jiyujin) and humans are mixed together. With no clear borders to separate them, what are their lives really like? This is an attempt to find out through two beastmen who travel through a time when the relationship between the two races is at its most dangerous.

Please note that the following contains spoilers.

The main characters in this story are Shirou Ogami, the representative of the beastmen, and Barballet Rosé, who is the mayor of Anima City in the anime. Unlike the anime's protagonist, Michiru, who is a former human, these two are purely beastmen in their perspective. As an author, I love strong and twisted characters like Shirou. He's strong to the point of it being almost bullshit, but he's also unbalanced and inflexible. This dichotomy is the source of his strength, but at the same time it is the most fragile part of him.

Rosé-Natalia was a girl who could counter-attack Shirou. Not just because she was around him, but also because Natalia had the same anger as Shirou, but had come to a different way of thinking. She was fully qualified to compete with his bottomless anger. This was an approach that Michiru, who had lived as a human in a human town in her past, could not take.

In the end, was Natalia able to save Shirou? I will not give that answer now, but wait for the story of the next era.

The following are my acknowledgments.

Mr. Nakashima, the scriptwriter, who gave me a great deal of background information in writing this story. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the staff who gave me hints on how to incorporate the magnificent setting into each person's story. I couldn't include everything, but the hints were an extremely important foundation for the story of Shirou and Natalia. Thanks to all of you, I was able to create the spin-off novel "BNA ZERO: Beasts Who Can't Be Clean". Thanks to the staff of Trigger for bringing the visuals from the anime directly into the novel. The mayor is so cute. I wish I could have my hair from my childhood back. To the proofreaders who never allow typos and omissions, I'm sure there were a lot of them this time....I'm really sorry. To the person in charge of the project, who had an absolutely tough time adjusting this time. Thank you for your hard work.

Last but not least. A stubborn man needs a place where he can cower and cry. Even more so because he has already lost it.

So let's meet again somewhere else.

Ise Nexe
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Ise Nekise Ise Nekise
Winner of the "Excellence Award" at the 3rd Shueisha Light Novel Newcomer Award in 2015. Her works include "Sealed Girl and Avenger's Luck (Rebellion Code) Prophecy" and "Meruhen Medohen Festo: Magical Girls' Prequel".

He is also the author of "HELLO WORLD if --Kankaikoji Misuzu gets the first broken heart in the world.

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